

1982 Continued

<u>Year: 1982</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
May 23	"The 12 th Man"	Acts 1:26
May 30	"On Obedience to Jesus Christ" Pentecost	Act 1:4
June 6	"Totality of God"	
June 10	"A Virtuous Woman" The Funeral Service for Ethel Anderson	Proverbs 31:10-31
June 13	"Back to Eden?"	Genesis 1:26
June 20	"The Art of Rebuking"	Prov. 27:5
June 27	* "Searcher of The Human Heart"	John 2:23-25
July 11	"Unfinished Agenda"	Hebrews 11:13
July 18	"There's Always Egypt"	Jer. 42:1-14
July 25	* "The Perils of A Short-Cut"	Exodus 13:17-18
August 1	* "To See God's Glory In The Morning"	Exodus 16:17
August 8	* "Serious Business"	Mark 6:7-8
August 22	"God's Children – Present Tense"	1 John 3:2
September 5	* "Carpenter's Son"	Luke 2:49
October 10	"...To See The Unconsidered Harvest Festival"	Psalms 51:15
October 17	* "Lessons From Luke"	Luke's Gospel
October 24	"A God To Praise"	Psalms 150:6
October 31	"The Meaning of Reformation"	
November 7	"A Link With The Eternal"	Phillipian 1:1
November 21	* "The Kingdom of God – Now"	Luke 23:43

1982 Continued

<u>Year: 1982</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
November 28	* "Not Something But Someone"	Luke 21:28
December 5	* "One Day"	Acts 1:11
December 12	* "Where God Is"	John 1:26
December 19	* "When Life Can Become A Bit Too Much"	John 18:37
December 24	* "Nothing to Fear Except. . ."	Luke 2: 9-10

Sermons Preached by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D.D.

<u>Year: 1982</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
January 3	"Toward the High Mark"	Phillipians 3:13-14
January 10	"To Be On The Alert"	Matthew 24:42
January 24	* "Things That Matter Most"	Matthew 27:22
January 31	* "Four Words"	Hebrews 11:1
February 7	"A True Picture"	John 1:18
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS A Series		
February 14	"No Other Gods"	Exodus 20:2-3
February 21	"Watch Your Language"	Exodus 20:7
February 28	"A Day Singled Out"	Exodus 20:8
March 7	"God's Helpers"	Exodus 20:12
March 14	"Life From God's Perspective"	Exodus 20:13
March 21	"Where Sex Belongs"	Exodus 20:14
March 28	"The Greatest Thief"	Exodus 20:15
April 4	"A God Who Can Cry"	Luke 19:14
April 11	"Easter - An Experience"	John 20:1
April 18	"To Tell The Truth"	Exodus 20:16
April 25	"The Love of Money"	Exodus 20:17
May 2	* "All or Nothing"	Luke 10:27
May 9	"The Christian Home: A 4-D Affair"	Luke 2:52
May 16	"Now About Sin"	Mark 7:21-22 & 1 John 1:8

January 3, 1982

"TOWARD THE HIGH MARK"

(Philippians 3:13-14)

Three generations have managed the business and I have had the good fortune to know them across the years and to be the recipient of one kindness after another. You can readily understand why last week, after Christmas, I made it a point to stop by with a token of gratitude, but was surprised when I discovered the sign on the door that read CLOSED - - and underneath it this explanatory word: "For inventory -- will re-open Monday, January 4."

It's one of those businesses that doesn't have the benefit, I presume, of a computer; they've not succeeded in operating their business on that level as yet. So, at this time of the year, undoubtedly they close their door and direct all of their energy to take this inventory, to take stock. And like as not, when I go back again I'll discover inside the entrance-way a series of clearance items, because their inventory will reveal to them that they have been stocking some items that are no longer profitable, and as soon as they can get rid of them, the better.

This is the time of the year, as one year ends and another year begins, when a person ought also to take inventory of the soul. In what things have I been dealing, in the past year in particular, that could be classified as unprofitable? And could I manage to be free of them and get rid of them? And also, at the same time, to concern myself with concentrating on those things that will bring a good return for the soul? There's a text for this sermon: the words of the Apostle Paul, the 13th and 14th verses of the 3rd chapter of a very wonderful letter that he wrote to some Christians who lived in the city of Philippi - -

"And this one thing I do," said he, "forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth for those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Of all the passages of Scripture that claim my soul this morning as I stand at this sacred desk on this first Sunday in January, 1982, this is the one that commands most respect, and I'm constrained to speak to you about it this morning.

Albeit I should also tell you, last evening Winifred and I had the good fortune to be dinner guests where only a party of six happened to be present. It was a very intimate and a very personal thing. The food was delightful. But far more important

than the food was the conversation that was engendered. We did not always agree. We differed, of course we did. But we differed as we had respect for one another. You've heard me say this repeatedly, that far more important than the food that we eat is the people with whom we share it and the conversation that takes place.

The one seated nearest to me may have realized that she was quite young in comparison to my age. And it may have dawned on her that she was seated alongside a person who in that room was the oldest person present! And then she put this question to me -- open-ended -- "Pastor, when you look back across your life . . . " -- and then she intended that I take it from that point. What an open door she placed in front of me! And I didn't quite know for the moment how to answer, but then the words came quickly, and I began by saying, "Well, as I look back across my life, I recognize how great is my debt to all the people who have been kind to me."

Would you believe me if I were to tell you that I do think on occasion, that perhaps I, more than any other person who has ever lived, has had so much given to him -- the people who have loved me, and continue to love me, and who encouraged me and been kind to me again and ever so often. And so my first response was, as I look back across my life, and had it to live over again, as she implied.....what difference might there be?

Well, there's no question about it -- I would want to be more sensitive, if that could be true, to all the goodness that I've received. Of all the things that my mother taught me, the one I want to remember most is that I should be grateful. And she gave me to understand that no matter where I might go in this world, I'd always be indebted to someone, for something. And I suppose that's one reason why, when I first went to Europe, knowing that would be the language barrier, I mastered as best I could how to say "thank you" -- the only two words that I learned in Swedish...in Danish...in German...in French...in Czech...in Polish -- because even when I ended up in Dachau, I knew that in this city so completely devastated, I would still be on the receiving end of some kindness and I'd be able to say (gentquia)? -- "Thank you." So that's what I first said to her. If I had it to live over again, I'd be even more sensitive to all the goodness that's come my way.

And then as though she were waiting -- " -- and secondly?" I had to say it, unashamedly, I look back and regret so much of which I was a part that I rue the day ever took place. I'm haunted by memories that I'd like very much to expunge.

Alvin Rogness, marvelous writer, thinker, theologian, preacher, administrator -- president of one of our seminaries in the mid-west -- by Pastor David's invitation he was the preacher from the Saint Luke pulpit once . . . out of the riches of his years

has written a very valuable book that I've given to some of you. It's called "The Book of Comfort." Now that word comfort. Don't forget, it comes from the Latin which means with strength, and a Christian is one who is meant to face life fortified, not as a weakling, not as one who has been crippled and battered and bruised, but one who is constantly made strong. And from his perspective, with that heart of his that's listened in on human souls across the years, he's written this very valuable series of essays.

Significantly enough, the very first one is entitled "When Memories Haunt You." And if I recall it correctly -- I can't give you the exact classification, but he categorized memories that cripple into three different sections:

- the memory of some catastrophic event in which we were caught up, a very untoward thing that gave a devastating stroke, and you remember it, and you can't quite free your mind of it. It did happen to you -- and so undeserved.
- the second category of memories is the unfortunate and the ugly and the untoward thing that happened to you by people, who deliberately did you in. It can happen, you know. For some reason or another you're a threat to that person, you intimidate that person, they establish a dislike toward you. And perhaps, woefully, at some stage when they can get even, they do you in -- the relationship that you have had that went sour, and struck a devastating blow -- you can't get rid of it! You're haunted by it, you have been bruised by it.
- the third category, if I remember correctly -- not the wrongs that have been done to you by others....but the wrongs that you yourself perpetrated, the evil that you designed, and you were a party to it. You look back across the years and you wish to God that the chapter had never been written. But it was! And as you remember it you're crippled by it. What now? I'm laying bare my soul to you . . . why should I keep this from you? I, whose feet of clay are like your feet of clay, and when I reach for my halo it's just as twisted and torn as your halo.

So I told her last evening: I look back gratefully; I look back regretfully.

Now when I come to this beginning of a new year, is this all that I can say to you? This passage of Scripture that grips my soul: the Apostle Paul, keen student of human nature, fervent disciple of the Lord, says, "But forget those things which are

behind, and press forward to those things that you have in Jesus Christ that are ahead."

So, one is in duty bound as a Christian, then, to look back -- it can't be otherwise. But when you remember, remember from the Christian perspective -- that's it! It isn't that you can't forget, and it isn't that you won't remember. It's this great business of learning how to remember, how to recall the things that haunt you.

As an example, let me say this to you as earnestly as I can . . .

-- suppose you were struck a devastating blow, that catastrophic thing, you happened to be in the wrong place, it did happen! Well, from the Christian perspective, say to yourself: "Who am I to think that I should be entitled to escape this thing when it's happening all the time to other people! It isn't that you can't forget -- it's how a Christian recalls.

-- So you have been done in by somebody? . . . so you have been abused, and your relationship has been exploited. It doesn't behoove any one of us, no matter how much we have been hurt by people, to look for perfection in somebody else. But we might be constrained to say to ourselves: "There but for the grace of God I could have done those things that have been done to me." So stained are all of us by original sin. It isn't that you can't forget, and it isn't that you won't remember. From the Christian perspective it's how you remember.

-- So I committed those things of which I am ashamed. But I need to remind myself, I am a child of God -- but I'm a sinful child of God. I can be willful, I can be disobedient, I can choose not to be good! I can enter into something, evil as it may be, with my eyes wide open! So stained am I by original sin. That's how I see myself. But I must always see myself as a child of God. Disobedient? Sinful? -- Ah, but nonetheless a child of God.

And that's the great news that the Christian church has to offer, that's why we talk about the good news of the Christian faith. It has two sides to it -- you are a sinner, I'm a sinner. But we are all children of God, who loves us.

I was one of six. None of us ever pleased our parents perfectly or completely. At one time or another we were all involved in doing things that were contrary to their wishes or their will. But was there ever a day when they came to us and said, "We no longer love you"? My parents may have said to us, "We don't like what you are doing." But despite what I did....(I think I should tell you, I did it less often

than my brothers and sisters) despite what we did, we were never less than their children, and they never allowed themselves to be less than what a good set of parents should be. A poor analogy? -- but there it is -- we're all children of God, and none of us is perfect. And God loves us. And God says, "I will forgive you, I will remember no more your sin." And the Biblical injunction is, then, "We are made free to run as redeemed."

If you should be here this morning, and you're crippled by past sins, this sermon is meant for you. Disabuse yourself of the notion that you've ever had a perfect record, and dwell on the happy thought that our Heavenly Father loves us, and redeems us. He's a good God, He's a gracious God, and He loves us forever and ever. And because He does, a Christian then, I think, is in duty bound to take heed from the Apostle Paul's admonition, and recognize that there's one thing: you press toward the mark of the high calling in Jesus Christ. A Christian is not a perfect person. But a Christian is characterized not by his perfection as much as he is characterized by his consecration, by the noble intention that remains.

Now you and I need to take stock at this time of the year. What is the noble intention that remains? What do you really want most as far as God is concerned? Dwell on that. Take the inventory of the soul -- do I still want to persevere and press toward His objective? Imperfect as I may be -- as long as this remains, there is always hope. And this can permit any person, then, to have a spring in his step and a light in his eyes -- I am forgiven....I am redeemed.

In recent years the Lutheran Church, and with proper justification, has made much of baptism. And we have an exceedingly precious baptism for two children at the close of this service. What happens in baptism? We indelibly mark on the fabric of the soul of a child the love of God. And that love remains constant.

So I greet you as another year unfolds. Let it be for all of us perhaps the best year ever. There's only one thing that makes the best year ever, when we allow ourselves to be rooted and grounded in the precious promises of God and to be enfolded by His eternal arms of one who said, "I will never leave you, I will never forsake you -- I'll never give up on you." And that's a happy thought.

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(transcribed as recorded)

Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen
Epiphany I - January 10, 1982

"A GOOD WORD FOR THE CHURCH"

(I Timothy 3:15)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I am fully aware of the fact that when I come to this sacred desk on any occasion, I am in duty bound to interpret for you the Word of God, to take a passage of Scripture that has gripped my soul, and then hopefully, if at all possible, to tell you what that text means.

There is a text for today's sermon, but I'm not so sure that I'm going to tell you what the text means. My primary concern now will not be so much with the interpretation of the text as to talk to you about the tone of the text - - not so much the theme of the text as the tone of the text. You know very well that on occasion something makes an impression upon you, not because of what was said substantively, but because of the way it was said.

Today's sermon bears the title: "A Good Word For The Church" . . . and the text: words written by the Apostle Paul to a younger friend of his by the name of Timothy. In fact he wrote him two letters. This is from the first letter, the 3rd chapter, the 15th verse:

"But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how
thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of
God, which is the church of the living God, the
pillar and ground of the truth."

How it may be with you I don't know, but this strikes a very responsive chord in my soul. Let me tell you why I say that. The Apostle Paul had gotten around, he had seen a good many things in his time. He was far older than his younger friend Timothy. Paul had been used by God to establish congregations. He was a mission developer, if you please. He was like a bishop also, because he was content not only to get a congregation started, but he'd keep in touch with those congregations, he'd get reports from them. And like as not he'd write them a letter. And every now and then the need to write that letter was to provide them a corrective, because even though they had been drawn together by the Holy Spirit, known as the People of God, they did not always behave as the children of God should behave. You're aware of that, aren't you? The church is not made up of perfect people. The church is made up of people, people who have been claimed by God, but they are still people.

I remember -- how the years have passed quickly -- when that God-given assignment came to me to go to India, to minister to a church, our Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in South India, that was torn asunder by enmity, jealousy, hostility. They even had two sets of Synod offices, and the one President had locked the other President out of the headquarters of the Synod. Christians behave like that! -- and taking their issues and their concerns into the courts when they could not decide among themselves as to how an issue should be resolved. Christians do not always behave in an exemplary manner.

I remember when God also gave me the good fortune to serve as the Dean of the Washington District, and how on occasion representatives of congregations would come to me and tell me how things were not going as well as they should be going within their little flock -- the unkind, the ugly and the untoward instance, the lack of trust and respect for the leadership and for their fellow members. I suffered a measure of despair when I would hear such reports.

The Apostle Paul had gotten around a great deal. He had seen much, he had heard much, and he had tried to correct a great deal. Now he's writing a letter to a younger friend, and he's in duty bound to talk about the Church of Jesus Christ. Think of all the things he could have said --

-- "Timothy, you're in for a lot of sorrow!

Timothy, you're in for a lot of headaches and heartaches!

It will demand all that you have to give! It will require
an endless amount of patience to deal with these
people, and you'll never quite know if they're going
to pull it off!

Timothy, I can give you chapter and verse again and again and
ever so often about the way people behave in a way that's un-
becoming the Church of Jesus Christ!"

....but he doesn't do that!

When he writes to Timothy in this text he has nothing but a good word for the church, and he simply refers to it in a grand and glorious way. With one swell stroke he says, "It's the church of the living God! -- the pillar and the ground of truth." That rings all kinds of bells in my soul.

I am by nature an enthusiastic person, you know it. I could never think of myself giving myself to something if I could not do it enthusiastically. I disdain

being a neutral, I want to be supportive. And I'm thrilled when I think of what the Apostle Paul might have said -- but in that very grand gesture he says to Timothy, as though this was the bottom line: "No matter what you may hear, no matter what you may see, no matter what on occasion you may think, the bottom line is this: It's the church of the living God, and it's solid -- it's the pillar, it's the ground of truth. Remember this."

So I've come to you this morning, on this, the Anniversary Sunday in the life of this congregation, to do the only thing that I can do! -- to speak a good word about the Church of Jesus Christ. It is not perfect. It's made up of people, a people claimed by God, and a people to be used by God, and a people upon whom God will never turn His back. "Thou art Peter -- "...and He might just as well said your name -- "and upon you I will build the church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Who can help but say a good word about something as grand and as wonderful as that?

Oh, I know that there are some people who don't always feel so enthusiastic about the church, inside or outside. I've not come so much to deal with the theme of the text as the tone of the text. It's enthusiastic. And I'll tell you three reasons, if you don't mind, why I'm enthusiastic about the church of Jesus Christ:

-- First, because it doesn't belong to us. It isn't ours. Sure, for certain purposes we use a particular name, Saint Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church, Silver Spring, Maryland -- but it's not our church. It's the church of Jesus Christ, the church of the living God, it belongs to Him. It was His idea, he thought it up, He planned for it, He's providing the Holy Spirit, He's taken the initiative, He brings us together. You ought to clearly understand it -- every time we come together we're responding to something that the Holy Spirit has initiated! And every time we refuse ourselves to be part of what God has in mind for us, we're denying ourselves something that the Holy Spirit has in mind for us! It's the church of the living God, it belongs to Him. And every time we gather together we do well to keep that in mind.

...That's why, as I explain to the New Member Class when we talk about worship -- what are the first words you hear from the presiding minister? --the person who is in charge of the gathering, the master of ceremonies, if you please -- what are the first words you hear from the presiding officer? Not, "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen"

not, "We're happy to greet you here in the name of Saint Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church" -- not at all!

The first words you hear: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." -- which is simply to say, we're here in God's name, for

this is God's house, and we are God's people. And we are meant to be about His work. So I get a thrill when I think of the church. It's not ours. It's His, and He has seen fit to allow us to become part of it. It's the only institution on the face of the earth that I know of that's given over completely to hold up before men and women and children of all ages the religious dimension, the God-factor.

The second reason I'm excited about the church is that every time we come together we don't think of ourselves. We think of Him, and we think of Him in awe and majesty. I am profoundly grateful I belong to a tradition that maintains this kind of approach into the very presence of God. Not all traditions do, not all congregations do. In some places when people come together as we've come together, there is just a current free folk meeting, where the emphasis, wittingly or unwittingly, can be very horizontal, where we think only in terms of the way we greet one another and how happy we are to see one another. Not that that isn't important -- you're not meant to ignore it. But there is a transcendental element that needs to be introduced. Our thoughts must be lifted up beyond ourselves to Him who is holy.

We endeavor to do this in a number of ways around Saint Luke. As an example, when our Supertuesday family comes together, the impressionable ones, we give them to understand that when they come to this room, this is not simply an ordinary room to which they come, it's not a multi-purpose room, it's not an assembly hall. And what happens here from this step on is not a stage! We have good and proper terms for every element, every aspect of this particular room, that they may relate it to something over and above and beyond them. You'd be pleased very much when you'd see them come in for worship on a Tuesday at 7:00 o'clock. They come in reverently, because I for one subscribe to the notion that a man is known by the things he reveres, man is known by the things he respects. And God pity us when we've lost a sense of respect for the holy. Sure, God is to be found anywhere and everywhere, but human as we are, we need to hear a directive -- "Take off your shoes, the ground on which you stand is holy ground."

I, for one, am profoundly grateful that you are a people who are sensitive to this sort of thing, that when we do come together we think in terms of Him who is above and beyond us, who is not the "man upstairs"....who is not a buddy-buddy - - - who is high and lifted up, as Isaiah saw Him.

It's a sad thing in many places that people have a way of dragging God down. Not that God is not to be found among us, but He is always the totally other. I shudder to think what would happen to us if we allowed ourselves to reduce God to our level. He sees fit to come to us, He stoops. But it's not within our province to drag Him down.

There's another reason why I'm so profoundly grateful that we belong to a tradition that subscribes to the historic liturgy. What is the liturgy but an ordered, dignified way by which to approach the Throne of Grace? That doesn't mean that we cannot be personal, that does not mean that we cannot be free. I speak a good word for the church, the church of the living God. It commands respect, and when into His presence we come, with awe.

I speak a good word for the church for a third reason: it's the only institution that I know of on the face of the earth that's constantly calling people to the mind and the spirit of Jesus Christ. I have a simple definition for the church, as to its function.

"The church is to be in this world as Jesus Christ."

Everything that Jesus did while He was here on earth, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, is turned over to the church! The great Commission remains: "Now you go" -- and essentially we are meant to go and do exactly what He was doing. And in plain common terms that we can understand, it's by focusing on persons, getting them to understand that they are children of God, that their lives can be lived meaningfully. That's that great and wonderful thing that Jesus Christ did when He was here on earth. Every time He would touch a person He would kindle a fire in their souls, He allowed them to believe that they were important, and that life could be lived meaningfully, no matter what happened - - - that we were not meant to be children of despair and despondency, that we were not born to be cynics.

I remember reading the way Mark Twain put it. But before I tell you that, let me read this: What does the man do for one

"TO BE ON THE ALERT"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father, and from His
Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

Matthew 24:42

I have not clocked it recently, but I presume the 14th Street bridge is surely less than ten miles from the place where you are seated this morning, and with optimum traveling conditions, one could be at National Airport in some 30 minutes from here. It is all so familiar to so many of us, particularly to those of you who may cross the bridge daily or head for National Airport with some measure of regularity. And as far as the Potomac River is concerned, we who live in this area look upon it as an old friend, with the utmost familiarity.

It's been made so different this past week. The placid or semi-placid Potomac has become a watery entombment. And within the remaining years of your lifetime and mine we shall never think of it without recalling it as an unwelcome grave, or a place where heroes were instantly fashioned.

I have been unable to rid it, this event of this past week so close to all of us, from my mind. And as I come to the sacred desk this morning I am naturally constrained to put aside the sermon that had been scheduled. I must share a reflection or two with you. Your patience, please. The words may not come as easily or as quickly as I should like, despite the pressure of the heart-beat that characterizes each syllable.

The passage of Scripture, and I have no right to stand at this sacred desk unless I am constrained to interpret for you a passage of Scripture -- and there's only one passage of Scripture that grips my mind as I am overwhelmed by this event of the past week -- it's recorded in the 24th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Some of you will readily recognize it:

"Watch, therefore, for you do not know
the hour . . . "

When the Gospel writer was dealing with this particular passage he was thinking, of course he was, of the return of Jesus Christ, of the establishing of His Kingdom here on earth. But by the very same token, our Blessed Lord gave the hearers in His day a constant alert: "You do not know the hour, you do not know the time." That's the passage of Scripture that keeps bobbing back and forth on the horizon of my thought as I've dealt with this event of the past week.

Now there are three things that I need to tell you this morning, as this sermon continues to unfold in purely auto-biographical fashion. It is, as any is perhaps intended to be, the personal testimony of one person. Hopefully, of course, that person is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. And I should be pleased indeed if by the time this sermon is concluded it would come to you unmistakably clear, with the divine perspective.

Observation #1: By the way of reflection, if you please -- a very simple thing -- two words: IT HAPPENED. My immediate reaction when I heard the news, not knowing the full story, of course, was simply this: it's a miracle that it never occurred before. I am not sitting in judgment on anyone. I wouldn't even attempt to do that if I could. There are so many things that we don't know and there are so many areas in which we're not qualified to speak, nor should we. But

it did happen.

Oh, we've taken a measure of pride in this, our airport, so close to us, that so few accidents have ever happened in its history. We've become so accustomed to thinking that nothing of this kind might happen, except soberly as we've thought of the possibility. Day after day and week after week, for so many decades, you see, in fact some of you did not know at all that there had been that tragedy in 1949.

We recognize, of course we do, that it can be said that the safest of all means of travel today, there are those who maintain is air travel -- far more risky to ride in an automobile, or a horse, or a bicycle, or a motorcycle. It did happen.

What else is to be said? It happened. And the impact was made. What can be done about it? The immediate reaction perhaps could be this, as I recall the lines of Maria in West Side Story -- when one of the characters had been stabbed...and there he is bleeding on the street...and all Maria can say is this: "I wish it were yesterday." But yesterday has come and gone. And yesterday was unscathed and unruffled -- there is the immediacy of what's before us. So I suppose my first observation that I share with you is this: IT HAPPENED. And it's over. And you can't go back five minutes earlier.

When Suzie Kerns was a member of this congregation (she and her family moved to Illinois) -- she had on display some of her art work. She left one of them behind, a batik that hangs in the main church office. I see it whenever I leave my office, on the wall directly opposite the door that leads to my office. Suzie has a custom of labeling her works of art. Every painting she's ever done, she gives it a name. And I said, "Suzie, what's the name for this one?" And then with a look on her face as much as to say, "Well it's obvious, Pastor, can't you see for yourself?" -- her title for this one is

"It's Over" -- aptly dubbed, for she portrays for us a tree, in the fall of the year, which has shed its leaves. Not a single leaf, I dare say, remains on the tree, if I remember correctly. So, as far as she's concerned -- it's over -- spring, summer has come and run its course. Now....the only thing that can be said -- it's over!

The second observation, by way of reflection -- IT HAPPENED SUDDENLY. First -- it happened. Second, it happened suddenly. Only this person or that person perhaps may have had a premonition, only the pilot who was accustomed to flying, as he indicated from his bed, had some idea that this could occur. I, who have done my share of flying, I can identify -- finding one's seat, being jostled a bit, eager to find just where you're to be located....then stuffing your carry-on underneath the seat in front of you...taking off your overcoat, your jacket, stuffing it up there in the rack ahead and trying to settle down as nonchalantly as possible, reaching for a magazine....giving only half-attention to what she's telling you about the necessary precautions that ought to be observed....

...in company with any of you, I too have known a measure of uneasiness at take-off and landing. To this very day if Winifred's seated alongside of me I reach for her hand on take-off, and there's that gentle pressure. Without any words between the two of us we know there's a prayer of thanks to God when we take off successfully and land just as well -- we've even been known to applaud when the landing's been made well.....

I can identify with them in the watery grave -- it happened -- suddenly.

And yet Scripture is always reminding us that death is inevi-

table. It's sure to come. Sometimes death comes as a welcome release, and sometimes death comes beautifully, as it did for my father of blessed memory. He was about 90 years of age when he died. And if you were to ask me what was the cause of his death, as an unlearned one, medically speaking, I'd have to tell you what maybe the doctors might say -- he died of old age -- worn out! - - "Raymond, I'm tired" - - that's what I heard him say. And almost as though it had gone full cycle I was doing for him within a week of his death, or ten days, what he had done for me at an earlier period in my life ---- I cradled him, this old man, in my arms....I washed his face, I shaved him, I groomed his hair, I prayed with him - - - all of these things he had done for me! -- years and years before....

...he had washed my face, he had groomed my
hair, he had prayed with me.....

For him death came beautifully and completely.

Death doesn't always come like that. Death can come in a tragic manner, and words defy description -- and in a manner we'd be very happy if we could rid from our thinking. I have had my share of it as I've ministered with any number of you, and with the other parish that claimed my soul as a pastor before I came to you. And yet when it comes suddenly -- unexpectedly -- tragically -- what is there to say?

The third thing.

First, it happened. Second, it happened suddenly. Third: it happened locally....which is simply to say to you, be on guard, my friend. If it should have happened two thousand miles away, it would have been no less tragic. And that's the sad indictment that comes to every one of us. Unless you are unusually sensitive, some-

thing that happens so far away doesn't seem nearly as tragic as when it happens close at hand. Whenever a person bleeds, no matter where that person may be, I too should bleed in Christ....wherever a person is hungry, ill-clad, neglected, ignored.....I too should bleed inside. Just because it doesn't happen at my door-step doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. And just because it may not happen so near to me, doesn't mean that it's less tragic when it happens somewhere else.

Oh, there are redeeming things that come out of anything. The Apostle Paul is absolutely right when he says that "all things can work together for good to those who love the Lord." We learn our lessons. There were the heroic ones. And we've learned a great deal that we hadn't learned before, and we will be far more sensitive to any number of things that we haven't heeded before. That purpose, too, is to be served.

Interesting, isn't it, in a sermon a week or two ago I had planned to preach for you, I was going to include an illustration that because of the pressure of time I omitted. When the Titanic was sunk, a New York paper, I've forgotten which paper it was -- a cartoonist tried to catch something of the feeling -- giant liner rent asunder, torn . . . it was one drawing that said (there were two drawings, by the way) the one drawing showing the liner, helpless at sea: THE SUPREMACY OF NATURE -

...and then there was another drawing showing a gallant man, absolutely refusing to take his place in a rescue craft, and stepping aside for a mother and a child. And the caption underneath that cartoon was this: THE WEAKNESS OF NATURE -
AND THE SUPREMACY OF MAN

The gallant ones, you see, will remember who plunged into the icy water to save a woman that a minute before he had never known existed

-- indelibly etched on the fabric of your soul that person -- has he been identified yet? -- who five times refused the possibility of rescue, giving way to others....

It happened. It happened suddenly. It happened locally. I'm not being morbid when I tell you, none of us knows the hour when it may happen to us. But it's inevitable. The Christian has a decided advantage. Heeding our Blessed Lord, the admonition remains, "Watch, therefore, for you do not know" . . . and by the grace of God we can always be made ready.

That's why some of us when we have our waking moments, as we face a brand new day, get squared off with God, if you please -- ask Him to order that day in a way that we might not disappoint Him. "Watch therefore - - this day" . . . and when night settles in and we lie down to sleep, to sleep with a good conscience, with a soul that's made ready, by the grace of God.

The Christian has this advantage. Happy indeed are they who can pray, "O Lord, in the hour of death, do not suffer me to fall from Thee." This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THINGS THAT MATTER MOST"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. (Amen.)

Matthew 27:22

Did it ever occur to you to ask the question: what is it that's primary in the mind of a preacher, this one in particular, if you please, as he stands at the sacred desk on a Sunday morning? In case you have not asked the question, let me encourage you to ask it -- and allow me to answer it immediately. What goes through my mind as I come to this sacred desk repeatedly, and for the opportunity I am profoundly grateful, is basically the very same thing that went through my mind on that Sunday, 26 years ago this month, when I first came to this sacred desk.

Little did you realize, had you been present then, that when I was about to preach the sermon I was saying to myself, well, here we are - - we're going to think about the things that really matter most.

Did it ever occur to you how seldom we really think about the things that matter most? When tape recorders were first put on the market, I recall how, being a guest in a certain person's home -- and he was that kind of a person, you know, who secreted his recorder, and then when the evening progressed and the greater part of it had been spent, he played back the evening conversation....and we could hear the things that we had been talking about. Honestly now, how much of it has so little value! Not that a purpose is not to be served in just talking, but to deal with the things that matter most -- that's something that stands in a class all by itself.

How fortunate we are to belong to a church whose tradition is this, that whatever happens in these moments with a man called by God to be an interpreter, that what he proclaims should be the Gospel -- rooted and grounded in Biblical truth. And that the net result should be to confront people with the person of Jesus Christ.

Some years back a religious journal used to deal with this subject periodically: How did your mind change in the last decade? I put that question to myself as I come to this sacred desk: How has my mind changed since 1956? One thing that remains constant, I have never allowed myself casually to come to this sacred desk. When I stand here I continue to stand with the sense of awe -- even as I came to you that Sunday in January more than a quarter-of-a-century ago.

Within this past week I've found time in my study to go back and scan all the Annual Reports since 1956.....and at the same time I've taken more than a casual glance at some of the sermons that have been preached from this pulpit in that same period of time. I was almost tempted to preach this morning, word for word as best I could recall it, that sermon that I preached that Sunday in January when I came to you, the Sunday before I was installed as your Pastor. Let me recall for you now the text -- the 22nd verse of the 27th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"What now shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? . . . "

...a question, you see: what I permit myself to believe the question. No question that's ever going to be asked you will be of greater importance.

For more than a quarter-of-a-century that's what I have been doing when I come to this sacred desk -- are you aware of that? No matter the content of the sermon, no matter the substance or its title -- interwoven throughout, that question has been there: What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ?

I am fully sensitive to the fact that in this quarter-of-a-century there

has been the passage of time for some of you -- that child that I baptized 25 years ago now has brought his children to be baptized....the couple that I married 25 years ago have now celebrated their silver wedding anniversary.... the person who was a teenager at 15 is now 41 years of age, and perhaps a grandfather at that! . . . the person who was 40 -- 26 years ago -- has been receiving Social Security benefits for a number of months by this time. And speaking of the passage of time, I am sensitive to the truth that the person who was 75 when I first came to you has been translated into God's nearer presence. To touch people at different stages in their growth and development is an awesome responsibility, when God's holding me responsible for what I've done as I've come to this sacred desk. With whatever clear conscience He may permit me, I will want to say to Him, again and again and ever so often I put to them the question: What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? . . . the question of Pontius Pilate.

The first thing that needs to be said: it's a personal question. And the questions that matter most in this life are always personal. He said to me as he was leaving church at 8:30 this morning, "Will you come to see me, Pastor? -- I'm going to be admitted to the hospital this week. I have cancer."

...you may read all that you want to read about cancer, but when you say to somebody else, I have cancer -- when it becomes as personal as all that, it's an entirely different matter. The questions that really matter most are always personal.

It is a personal question that has to be answered individually. I repeatedly tell those whom I instruct in the faith that belief is always a very personal thing. Nobody can tell you what you believe -- only you can say what you believe. This is one reason why, I suppose, I object strenuously, in my own mind at least, when they re-wrote the Apostles' Creed in certain quarters...and the congregation stands and with one voice -- with which I have no objection,

that they ought to have this unanimity -- but for a people to say: "WE believe." I don't mean to press the point unduly, but nobody can tell you what you believe. I cannot presume to say that the person who stands alongside of me believes, but if you happen to believe as I believe, and I believe as you believe, then together we can stand.....but it's still a very personal thing.

I beg you, do not find fault with me, but in this moment before you I've tried to bring to your attention what I honestly believe is something of value that we've introduced into this congregation within the past 25 years, what has to deal specifically with the Confirmation experience. The first class was 26 youngsters; we have had as high as 66 youngsters in the Confirmation Class. But I've never allowed myself to believe that you confirm a group of youngsters en masse, where they answer collectively. In my own mind I also quarrel with the church when it had its own study some years back, when they were dealing with Confirmation, and they said basically Confirmation is a young person identifying with the adult community. It's more than that! Confirmation is a young person taking his or her stand for Jesus Christ, and that stand has to be taken individually. We become a collective expression of it, of course, but it has to be taken individually. In the things that matter most we respond personally, and that's why we introduced, and I believe earnestly introduced it wisely and well. Even when the confirmand meets for his private and personal interview at Bethany, our Retreat House, we deal with that for a half-hour: the response that you're expected to give, and what does that response mean to you as a person?

. . . and then there's that great moment in the service itself when the individual walks up and gets very close to the altar, and the question is put directly: Do you love the Lord Jesus and do you promise to serve Him through His Holy Church?

. . . and then we say every voice remains silent,
except yours. It's a personal answer that has to
be given individually.

Pilate made the mistake of his life when he turned to the people and said,
"What shall I do?" Nobody can answer for you. You have to answer for yourself.

What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ? As the sermon concludes this morning let me introduce an element that perhaps you've never considered before, and that is, underline the preposition with. What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? Pilate didn't read it that way, but I hope you will -- an invitation to partnership, a challenge to identify with what Jesus Christ (and I don't say it facetiously) with what Jesus Christ is up to. Now if that question is to be put to you: What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? -- you need to know what Jesus Christ is up to! What is He doing? In what direction is He heading? From a human perspective, how is He expending His energies? To whom is He paying attention? -- ah, that's the exceedingly precious thing! When you recall Jesus Christ, no matter how you read His life and the time that He spent here on earth, He was always paying attention to people, talking with them, challenging them, appealing to their better side, enabling them to believe that they were important to God.

What is Jesus Christ up to? He's always up to a concern for people, endeavoring to stamp upon the fabric of their minds and their hearts and the total being, that their lives do count, and they are meant to count for God! As you've heard me say it repeatedly, they're not meant for Hell, they are meant for Heaven. And that's no small thing to introduce into the life of any person. From a human perspective, it's this noble motivation of always saying you can be better than you are! . . . by the grace of God!

What are you doing with Jesus Christ? I have my moments when I think of the time of Judgment. I suppose the older one becomes the more he thinks in those terms. For one day it will all be over. And when it's all over, then

what? Well, maybe that's the question-of-questions that will be put to us: "What in Heaven's name were you up to while you were here on earth?" Happy indeed is that person who can say, "I sought in all things to glorify the name of Jesus Christ."

I hope you are to be numbered among those who take time to read the Book of Reports. For when you read the Book of Reports I hope you are able to read between the lines. As has been already said this morning, deal not only with facts and figures, but deal with motivation and objective - - to what end did we expend our energies this past year? Ours is a generation that's supposed to be more conscious of the conservation of energy than any group of Americans in recent history. We're supposed to be. How did we make our energy count in the name of Jesus Christ? And when you read that Book of Reports, happy indeed is that person who can put it aside and say it's an account of our partnership with Jesus Christ.....

-- what have I done with Him?

-- with what causes did I identify?

-- could I honestly say that, as a member of Saint Luke Church I've helped to advance the things that are precious to Jesus Christ?

And when the final story is written, that's what matters most: the manner by which we fulfill our partnership with Jesus Christ.

* * * * *

(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"FOUR WORDS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father and from His
Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

Hebrew 11:1

George Arthur Buttrick was one of the great preachers who influenced my life by his substance and by his style. I think I recall every single sermon I ever heard him preach, and I've tried to read what he's written.

I recall in particular as I stand at the sacred desk this morning how on one occasion he was invited to deliver the commencement address at a high school graduation somewhere in mid-America. The train arrived early in the afternoon, and before he could go to the place where he was to be accommodated he thought he'd go by the local high school auditorium. And as he wandered in he found that the graduating class was preparing for its ceremony that night.

What they were doing did not impress him nearly as much as the class motto that he found emblazoned on the praesidium -- three words:

DEEDS -- NOT WORDS

Evidently somebody had charged the class with action. Once they had their chance, they'd make their mark. No question about that!

He soon found himself quarreling with the motto, crying out within himself, even though others might not have heard it - - "This is only a half-truth, if not an untruth or a falsehood. -- 'DEEDS -- NOT WORDS' - - Ah, but he said to himself, and convincingly so, words are deeds. Words do matter." Let me speak certain words to you, and I will have done something that could alter for good or for ill my relationship with you. Words are that important. Make

no mistake about it.

Did it ever occur to you how important certain words are, certain very simple words, and words simply spoken with deep feeling.....

- - two people can meet -- a relationship is emerging, and the shape of that relationship is determined when once three words are spoken: "I love you" -- and the whole future now is to be determined by the validity that's to be given to those words. Words are important. Once they're spoken something is done that can help to fashion and determine a situation or a relationship itself.

Take three other words -- I hesitate to speak them, I shudder at the implication that's involved: "I hate you."

....and once those words are spoken something is done -- a deed has been performed that alters a relationship from that point on, no matter what one may have thought up to that time. But now something's been said -- and once that's been said something's been done to change a relationship.

- - "I shall return" -- and a wave of hope went into all directions, wherever a weary humanity was experiencing the toils and tribulations of a conflict. McArthur's "I shall return" instilled hope and courage and confidence in any number of people -- even to this day as one recalls those three days.

As this service progressed, we used four words in particular, and today's sermon bears the title: "FOUR WORDS." And the text, the 1st verse of the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" which is simply to say, things are determined by what we believe.

We used those four words when we stood, faced the altar, and as with one voice declared: "I believe in God" You did say those words, you know. I am presuming that every single one of you said them. I have no way of knowing for certain. We have had in this congregation certain people who found some articles of the faith difficult to accept, and as the Creed was being recited, by their own admission they told me they went silent at this point or that point because they didn't honestly believe what the words said. But I would like to believe that every single one of you, as with one voice, said "I believe in God" -- four words -- that set the tone for our coming together.

That you may fully appreciate what I've just said, suppose we would have said four other words -- five words -- "I don't believe in God" - - - the nature and the character of our coming together would be entirely different from what we've already said -- "I believe in God."

I don't know that a person ever stands at his highest stature until he is able to say those words. For once you say those words you determine your relationship toward the Creator of the universe, and once you say those words you determine for yourself the kind of life you're going to live.

Let me say it to you as strongly as I can, I have little patience with people who say to me, "It doesn't make much difference what a person believes -- it's what he does that counts." I try to be patient. I think I try to understand why they are saying what they're saying, because perhaps they have been disappointed with people who profess something and then have done something to the contrary, and they've had to discredit the words that were spoken. But by and large I still become very impatient with people who say, "It doesn't make much dif-

ference what a person believes, it's what he does that counts." I say to you, what a person believes determines what he does. Whether you recognize it or not, belief is always the basis for behaviour, and creed is always the cause for conduct. What you believe determines the way you think, the way you feel, the way you act. Let my wife believe that I've been to a meeting when I go home at 11:00 o'clock at night, and she may treat me one way....if she has reason to believe that I wasn't where I said I was going to be, her attitude can be entirely different. What a person believes determines what he does.

Let me give you Exhibit A. I'm going to recite for you now what I recited for you perhaps in one of the first sermons that I preached when I came to you a number of years ago. It is indelibly etched upon the fabric of my mind and of my heart. When I made that first journey overseas not long after World War II, when I spent about three months on the continent -- from London to Warsaw -- and saw the death, the devastation and destruction that was rampant everywhere. One of my fellow pilgrims was a Jew -- Maurice Tenenbaum. Maurice wanted me to go with him to visit the concentration camp, but I did not go. And I presume because I knew very well that I could not take what I would see. It was difficult enough for me when I saw the documentation of what he had seen -- the films that were presented as evidence of the war crimes trials at Nurenberg . . .

- - heap after heap of skeletal remains
- - cakes of soap made from human flesh
- - gloves, lamp shades, made from tanned human skin....

My friend, very perceptive, said, "Shaheen -- what could they have believed that they would do such things?" He was absolutely right! It's because of what they believed that they did what they did. If one is a political liability, you annihilate him....if you have to have a scape-

goat, there you treat a scapegoat as you think a scapegoat should be treated. And what you don't realize, that all of those old people, the invalids, the ones who were no longer productive to society, who are a drain on the economy -- it costs money to feed them and to clothe them and to protect them and to shelter them and to get medicines for them... they're a drain on the war effort, you get rid of them. That's what they believed. Don't you ever say again that it doesn't make much difference what a person believes. It makes all the difference in the world. For what a person believes determines the way he behaves.

I believe in God. I believe that this world did not happen accidentally. There is a Creator behind it, the creative mind. And I believe that the one who created the world was not just one who had a detached interest in the world. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe that God, having made the world, has a continuing interest in the world. I believe that God, when He made man, gave him the freedom of the will. But that same God did not say to Himself, I don't much care what they do with that freedom! If they inch toward Hell, I will take note of it. If they desire Hell, I will appeal to the spark of the divine which lies within them which I myself placed in them! And I will inculcate that, and I will appeal to them constantly.

I believe in this kind of God! It makes all the difference in the world when you can say that you believe in God, when you believe in the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is never enough just to say you believe in God. We Christians have a decided advantage. We know the real nature and character of the God in whom we believe because He's been revealed to us through the Scriptures. And one day one of His ardent followers could say when he looked at Jesus Christ: "In that person all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell" - - so much so that no

longer do you say that it's what a person believes that matters as much as you are able to say: "I know in whom I believe."

In the final analysis, why do I believe in truth? -- not only because it is objective...of course. But I believe in people who have personified truth -- that's why I believe in truth, because I've found people who are truthful at great price...

....sure, I know there is such a thing as love as an objective, but why do I believe in love? To begin with, there was that woman of very humble origin, the daughter of an immigrant, who first cradled me in her arms and taught me the meaning of love. I can never deny the fact of love any more than I can deny my mother. I believe in love, because I have been loved, and I know what it is to love in return.

It makes all the difference in the world, I say to you, as you contemplate the alternative. And you can't have it both ways: you either believe in God -- or -- you don't believe in God. There ought to be a spring in your step when you leave the service today, because for a single hour, or the greater part of that hour, we have been a gathered company of people who declare in no uncertain way that they believe in God. And that's why from this moment on when you face the world outside, with all of its trial and its tribulation, with all of its peril and its poison, with all of its weariness and its wickedness, you'll try to persevere with patience because you believe at the heart of the universe there is God, who is good, who is great, and who is gracious.

Don't ever say again it doesn't make much difference what a person believes. When I stood at the grave of my brother, when I stood at the grave of my father, when I stood at the grave of my mother, it made all

the difference in the world what I believed! I have confessed to you on occasion, I have been victimized by depression. Not very often. But enough of it to know what some of you go through, and at the very depth of it, it made all the difference in the world by what I believed.

How you categorize it I don't know, but it makes all the difference in the world when I come to this sacred desk, as one person in particular, as to what it is that I believe. What I believe about myself....what I believe about the God whom I proclaim....what I believe about you.....what I believe about this congregation. This, I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"A TRUE PICTURE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 1:18

Many of us covet for ourselves, as we quietly reflect upon our relationship with our children and grandchildren, the way by which we think we'd like to be remembered by them. Now there's nothing wrong with that. Happy indeed is that person who thinks he's exerting a wholesome influence that is worthy of being remembered.

Quite unashamedly I don't mind telling you that if not now, then hopefully in the years to come those two sons of ours, and those two grandsons -- I'd be very happy indeed if when they think of me, they might remember how on occasion I crawled in bed with them at nighttime and shared with them an evening prayer. Not without risk, I dare say. I remember one time in particular when, going out of the darkened room, I thought he was safely asleep....only to have him say -- "But I can't see God....I can't see Him. What's He like?"

It gives me pause to think, of course it does, and then I conclude, as well I should, that this perchance is the bottom line when we come to talk about the spiritual maturing of a child. You can rest assured that some progress is being made if a child will ask the question: What is God like?

Perhaps you are a Sunday School teacher, if not a parent, and so in a Sunday School class situation the youngster startles you and says -- right there, right aloud in the presence of all the other people, and puts you on the spot -- "But what is God like?" I submit to you that it's a good thing when that happens, because that's why we have Sunday School. Sunday School is to teach people about God. And if we don't succeed in introducing them to the basic fact of God, then we're failing.

You need to know this, and don't fault me for it -- when he put the question to me: What is God like? -- I said, "Before I answer, why don't you tell me what you think God is like." And he did. And as I recall it for you as best I can, this was his answer: "God is very, very old, and He lives in Heaven."

What will you make of the answer, honestly now? Is it a good answer, or a poor answer? I sometimes think it's not a very good answer. Now be patient with me.

God is very, very old . . . it makes me feel as though he thinks God is antiquated, out of step with this present generation, that what's happening now is alien to Him, and He doesn't quite know what's going on because He's very, very old.

And when he says to me, "God is very, very old" -- I shudder if he implies that being very, very old, God is very, very tired. What's to be said for a God who is old and tired? That question needs to be asked.

Or what's to be said of a God who is antiquated? Once in a small group where young people were present, the leader in charge probed them, and deftly so, by asking this question: How much do you suppose God knows about nuclear fission?

-- How much do you think God knows about radar?

He was shocked to have the youngsters say: "Not very much." Well, that's what happens if you think in terms of a God who is antiquated, and very, very old.

...or a God who is only, as you think of Him, in Heaven. I wouldn't give much for a God, who when we think of Him wouldn't think of Heaven. But to imprison God in Heaven -- does that mean God has no interest in this world? -- that God's only concern is Heaven?

Now do you understand, when so innocently he says to me -- "God is very, very old, and lives in Heaven" -- why I ask myself, dare I trust him with this concept of God for the rest of his life?

Alvin Rogness, able preacher, good theologian, one-time preached from the Saint Luke pulpit...he's written a number of things and relates very well to people of all generations. Once he dealt with the question: What is God like? Let me read for you the paragraph he wrote:

"Most people picture God as a comfortable old grandfather, with a long, grey beard, clothed in a long flowing white nightgown. Generally speaking, He is in good spirits. But sometimes He becomes angry, and sends earthquakes and war and rheumatism to make people unhappy. He has angels to run His errands, and His Heaven is filled with old cranks who've never learned to laugh . . . "

There are people who, when they think of God, think of Him in those terms.

Today's sermon bears the title -- "TRUE PICTURE." We need to have God in sharp focus, we need to have a true picture. And there's a text -- of course there is a text - - I have no right to come to this sacred desk unless what I share with you is rooted and grounded in Scripture....and the text is the 18th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"No man has seen God at any time . . . "

Is it futile for me to go on with this sermon? You can read for yourself the intimation in the bulletin that you have in your hands. For this sermon is meant to constitute a part of me which is trying to speak to this very thing as we endeavor to describe what can't be described - - "No man has seen God at any time."

The old Jew, of course, settled for that quite comfortably. It was the command: "You shall not make unto me any graven image" -- you don't take your hands and you don't try to fashion a likeness, and then say "This is God" -- because they were given to understand from the very beginning that you can't picture God. God is spirit. They had to settle again and ever so often for what they were told: "I AM THAT I AM" - - and you be content with that. They were never allowed to deal with anything that was like a picture of God! "No

man has seen God at any time" . . . and so the Jew settled for that: "I AM THAT I AM."

Henry Sloane Coffin, theologian, writer, preacher, interpreter of Biblical truth, one-time President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, was commissioned to go to the Far East to speak to people who represented different religions about the Biblical understanding of God. His purpose, of course then, his work was to tell people what God is like, to answer this question. Before he went he had a session with the rabbi, a very learned one, and perceptive. When they were dealing with this very thing, about the basic nature and character of God, the rabbi said - - let me read for you exactly what he said to Henry Sloane Coffin - - "You Christians possess one advantage over us. When we use the word God our listeners have a somewhat vague conception in their minds of righteousness and power, combined in a being who fills the universe. When you Christians employ the word, your hearers think at once of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth." And the rabbi was absolutely right, because this is what God Himself had in mind. And that's why you need to hear the rest of the text. I only read part of it for you. Always give God a chance to finish His sentence - - always give God a chance to give you His complete thinking on a subject. The text reads:

"No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. . . ."

That's exactly what God had in mind. No one has ever seen Me - - but I'll see that I'm declared - - I'll see that I will be made known to you." And that's exactly why Jesus Christ came into the world.

Now let's deal with the question: What is God like? How do you get a true picture?

Well if I wanted a true picture of anyone or anything I think I'd go to those who are in a position to give it. I wouldn't fool around with people who

weren't qualified. That's why I'm so happy I can turn to the Bible. The Bible is so completely authoritative on this score, for if you want an assessment of the Bible -- the Bible is an autobiography of God. You make a mistake when you permit yourself to think it's a book about man. It deals with men, and women, and children. But it's not first a book about people -- it's a book about God... And God's dealing with people, and the way people ought to deal with one another on the basis of God's dealing with them. So if you want to know what God is like and you want a true picture, you first turn to the Bible...for the Bible reveals to us the basic nature and character of God. We get a better glimpse of what He is, who He is, and what He's been up to.

This may be a feeble attempt on my part, but be patient with me -- you're seated in a room, there's a partition. You hear a voice or voices on the other side. You're deeply troubled...you can hear something -- you can't quite make it out, but you can't see. You'd feel far more comfortable if you could see who it is. After a while you get up, and you walk outside -- a step or two in the corridor, you turn to the right, and there's a door. You knock on the door -- ah, the person answers. And then and there you can see who this person is. And an entirely new and different dimension is added to your experience.

Down deep inside every one of us there is this hunger, there is this thirst, this desire "to see" God. And God Himself satisfies that need in our lives and reveals Himself through Scripture. It's the Bible that tells us about God.

Martin Luther said, "It's the Bible that's the cradle of Jesus Christ" . . . which is simply to say it's in the Bible that Jesus Christ is made known to us. How do you know anything about Jesus Christ? You know by what you read in the Scriptures. Everything that I've preached to you from this pulpit comes to you by way of the Scriptures -- it's the norm for our faith, what we believe and what we practice. A writer of the New Testament, referring to Jesus Christ, could say: "In him -- in this person -- all the fulness of God is pleased to dwell."

You're not forgetting, are you, there was that time when some disciples came and asked the age-old question: Show us what God is like -- this yen to know. And quietly and confidently -- let me give you a free translation. You know the answer for yourself, in classic Scriptural terms, but Jesus said, "You want to know what God is like? -- you really want to know? Take a good look at me. Whoever has seen me sees God!"

We Christians have this advantage. There's no question about it. When you think of Jesus Christ you think of God. When He was here on earth there were those when they encountered Jesus Christ, walked away and reverently put their fingers to their lips and whispered the name of GOD.

So you look at Jesus Christ in order to find out what God is like. Now let me ask you the question: How do you really know a person? I'm numbered among those who honestly believe you know what a person is by what he does. It may take a little while at times, and that's why some of us cherish friendships that last. The longer we know them the better we know them. What they really are will surface.

A person is what he does. I know there is room for hypocrisy there - a person may so act as to give you the impression of what he really isn't, but in the long run -- make no mistake about it -- in the long run what a person really is will be revealed. So if you want to know what God is like you look at Jesus Christ -- and what do we find Him doing? - - loving people, forgiving people, appealing to their better side, offering nothing but goodness, personifying for them Truth.....living among them as God would walk in their midst.

If you want to know what God is like, we Christians have an advantage. Look at Jesus Christ - - a human being is always God's preferred method of making Himself known.

I am ashamed of myself when I look back and think of my beginning years in the ministry. At 25 years of age I was so God-sure of so many things, particularly the way I felt God changed people. I followed a man who had been my mentor, my tutor, and I use the word advisedly -- whom I fairly adored, and learned so much from him. But in my immaturity it troubled me greatly when I heard somebody say that when they thought of him they thought about God. I thought to myself, at 25 years of age, how could anybody dare to equate or to identify a person with God?

As the years come and go, I think of how absolutely precious it was that that could have been said of my predecessor. How do we think of God? Every now and then we meet someone who is God-like! You've heard me say it again and ever so often - -

-- I have my moments when I believe in truth because I've met persons who are truthful.....

-- why do I believe in goodness? -- because I've encountered people who are good!

-- why do I believe in love? -- because I know how I have been loved....and how I love in return.....

It's Scripture, I tell you, we are "living epistles." God becomes real to people

through people.

A few Christmases ago I found myself writing a note on some cards that I sent to a limited number of people. And I was thinking about Christmas, celebrating the fact that God has come to us in Jesus Christ -- a tremendous truth. And I found myself writing so easily: "When I think of you, my friend, it's so easy to believe that God is in this world through Jesus Christ."

When Henry Drummond was introduced to a chapel audience, George Adams Smith said, "Let me present to you a man who will remind you of Jesus Christ." It's possible. And it can happen -- would you believe it -- through you."

...."No man has ever seen God"

....but I can see people
such as you who say they believe in God.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"A DAY SINGLED OUT - A PLACE CALLED
HOLY"

GRACE, mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Exodus 20:8

Today we continue the series of sermons based on the general theme of the Ten Commandments:

"I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no
other gods before Me.

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord
thy God in vain, for the Lord will not
hold him guiltless that takes His name in
vain.

And for today's consideration:

"Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy."

I suppose I could say to you, to all intents and purposes the benediction could be pronounced at this point in the service. Don't let me build up your hopes, it's not going to happen. But in a very real sense, the sermon has already been preached regarding this subject....

....you may not have thought of it in this way, but no matter where you may live, if you've driven here this morning, as soon as you walked out of your house, turned your ignition key in the car and headed in this direction, you were giving excellent testimony to the truth that's inherent in this text:

"Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy."

To all intents and purposes this sermon, as far as you're concerned, has already been preached....

Or perchance if you're numbered among those people who last night, even as you prepared for bed, may have read the Scripture lessons as printed in the bulletin that you received and helped to prepare yourself for what was going to happen today within these hallowed walls, you've already preached this sermon.

...or if perchance you're numbered among those who could walk to this place -- you've already given testimony to the truth of the text. For undoubtedly there were those on your street who saw you heading

for a particular place on this particular day --

"Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy"

...that's exactly what you're doing.

Surely there is a smile of Heaven upon you as you remember what God said you ought not to forget.

If you have yet to reach 40, would you be kind enough to let me tell you the salutary thing that lies ahead for you. Speaking from my own experience, it was only after I had hit 40 that I began to appreciate, as I had never appreciated before, the basic values that had been inculcated in my life during the impressionable years. It was only as I hit 40 that I began to recognize what it was that I had been taught. As an example: thinking of today's sermon, while my parents were not regular church-goers, Sunday in the home in which I grew up was different. It was different from any other day in the course of the week. There was a limited amount of activity in my home on Sunday. And now when I look back, I even had what we called in those days, a "Sunday suit" that was reserved especially for when I'd go to Sunday School or church - - even the clothing that I wore had a certain halo, if you please, attached to it. It was set aside for a certain day, it was set aside for a certain purpose. The older I become, the more I recognize the value of that kind of thing. Today it's so different.

I remember, of course, when I was growing up, my home-town pastor talked about the threat of the "Continental Sabbath" - - because the Europeans, 40-50 years ago, were much more liberal than we were a half-century ago . . . but now, there's no difference - - the commercialization of the Sabbath, the Open Sunday -- anything goes these days, more or less. It's so different. And I am reasonably certain we are not the better because of it.

You may smile broadly, but only momentarily, when I tell you about the man who was my predecessor in the parish where I first served -- 50 years ago, as I recall it, when he was living he would never so much as buy a Sunday newspaper, or have it delivered to his home, for he would not be a party to keeping some youngster from going to Sunday School because he had to deliver the Sunday newspaper...nor would he go to the store across the street from the church to buy a copy, because by his patronising that store he'd encourage that store to keep open on Sunday . . .

....don't you dare smile too broadly, my friend -- give the man credit for taking very, very seriously what he believed to be was a commandment of the Lord. That was his way of trying to give due and proper regard for a divine directive.

The man who was my mentor in theological seminary, who cradled in his arms both of our sons when they were named for Jesus Christ, grew up on a farm in York County. On one occasion he told us in class how if he were going to the barn on a Saturday night to milk the cows, and as he headed for the entry his father would catch him whistling, his father would say, "Cut that out, Harvey -- tomorrow's Sunday" - - even on a Saturday night, that lad growing up on a York County farm in Pennsylvania was taught to have a regard for a day in the week that was meant to be a very special day - - don't smile too broadly! None of us has a right to short-change anybody who takes very seriously what we may take lightly, a divine directive.

Some years back, when we were being shown around the city of Charlotte, North Carolina, our escort said, "Now do you see that store across the way? -- let me tell you about that store. It's a department store." . . . and we could see as we looked at that store, merchandise items attractively displayed in the windows. Said our friend, "When Sunday comes, the curtains are drawn - - for that person who owns that store is a devout churchman. He wouldn't so much as think of entertaining the thoughts of people who pass by on a Sunday to think in terms of buying and selling." - - don't smile too broadly, my friend - - there's much to be said for any person, anywhere, who takes seriously a divine directive.

Said God, when He laid down the law -- and I must remind you what I've tried to tell you in the two earlier sermons - - when God lays down the law, it's not because He's on any ego-trip, God forbid that we should even think in such terms - - when God laid down the law He had our benefit in mind, He was thinking in terms of what would be best for us: rest -- recreation of the mind and the spirit.

I began my ministry during World War II. Bethlehem Steel had a large operation in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Those who hadn't gone off to war were busily engaged in the war effort. They had three shifts, going seven days a week. I have proof positive for the kind of thing that God had in mind when He gave this Commandment, when one of the men came to me and he said, "Pastor, I can't take it any longer! I have been working for seven weeks, seven days a week - - I can't take it! God knew that all along. You take one day, and it's meant to be different -- a day not only of rest - - but let me say it again as quickly and as earnestly as I can, of recreation of mind and body and spirit. Some day, somehow, we might give God credit for knowing a thing or two as to how this world was meant to operate, and how we were meant to live -- in our relationship with Him and in our relationship with one another.

As far as the Commandment is concerned, you begin by underlining the first word:

Remember - - which implies, if necessary you make a deliberate effort. There are some things that never just happen, they happen only as you make a conscious effort . . remember. And when you speak of the word remember, it implies, of course, very properly, a recollection of something that happened. I'm suggesting to you that you think in terms - - I told you each time I preach a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments I endeavor to provide you an insight that I was unable perhaps to provide you at an earlier time. I'm suggesting now, when you think of the Lord's Day, or the Sabbath, by whatever term you want to call it, it's still one-day-in-seven - - - that you think in terms of an anniversary.

We need anniversaries because we're human. We need a particular time, we need a particular season when we look back and remember....

-- why do we have birthdays? -- as an anniversary celebration when we look back and we remember that once upon a time we were born, and there were two people in particular whom God chose to bring us into this world - - that's why we observe birthdays.....not only to think in terms of ourselves but to think in terms of the relationship we have with those whom God used to bring us into this world. . .

And then perchance somewhere along the line we'll place a high value on the fact that we were not only born but we were born for a reason . . . and every time the anniversary of a person's birth comes along he ought to ask himself the question, as he looks back and recalls the years that have come and gone so quickly: and to what end? What difference does it make that I have been born? - - a good question for any man to ask himself on a birthday anniversary.

-- a wedding anniversary - - why do we have them? Not that on one day in the course of the year a spouse should love the mate. ...but on that one day in the year in particular one should realize that one is related to one person in a very intimate way, as related to no other person, and the sharing of a life, and the traveling together of a common path -- remember.

We need to look back, and recall. And on this one-day-out-of-seven -- or I should say this one-day-in-seven -- because in a certain sense every day is precious in God's sight, you know that don't you? - - we ought to place a halo on every day, not just one day alone. And God holds us accountable for what we do with each of the seven days. But in this one-day-in-seven we think specifically of what's been done for us.

I don't know of any religion on the face of the earth that makes as much of the

recollection of the past as our Jewish friends in their religion. You may not have to know a Jew to know this to be true, you can read the Old Testament for yourself - - again and again and again God is asking them to look back and to recite for themselves what it is that's been done for them. And so on this one day in the week in particular we're asked to look back and remember what God has done for us! -- six days -- the seventh day -- rested . . . look back. And God called good what He had done. And God said, "It's for you, the crowning glory of my creation -- you enjoy it, you make the most of it. What a salutary effect it would be if every Lord's Day you and I sat down deliberately -- remember -- God created the world. We brand it to easily a wicked world, a world that's headed toward Hell....but a world that God says is "My world -- I made it, I know how it's best meant to operate . . ." If only one day in seven you and I sat down and deliberately thought about that, how different the six days in the week that follow could become. When we saw from the divine perspective, this is God's world, and we're meant to be in the arena where the drama of life is acted out in a way that brings honor and glory to Him who created it - - remember -- this day -- God looked upon His world and God called it good, and He gave it to us....remember.

For us Christians the Lord's Day, when death could no longer have dominion over Him, when He arose from the dead and Christians believed that to be such a tremendous truth, they said we must never, never forget it! We are children of the light and not of the darkness . . . we are children of life and not of death. And every time we come together on the Lord's Day we ought to remember that it was on this day that the Holy Spirit enveloped a company of believers -- empowered, enlightened them, and then sent them out into the world to turn the world upside-down - - it happened. What a tremendous difference it could make if every time you and I come together we could say to ourselves, we're looking back and remembering something that happened, and we are the heirs to it. And every Lord's Day is meant to be a kind of Easter all over again, and every Sunday is meant to be a kind of Pentecost all over again.

I have not come to this sacred desk this morning to rebuke you for not keeping the Lord's Day holy. I have come here to commend you, and to encourage you. Voltaire said he could ruin (I'm giving you a free translation) - - he could ruin the faith of people by destroying their Sabbath, their Lord's Day, as the case may have been. And he succeeded fairly well! A people shall be known by what they regard as holy. Remember -- this day.

I am deeply gratified when I think what happens here at Saint Luke, how you come, how you pay attention to God's Word, how you encourage one another in the fellowship that you have, in the kind of thing that's engendered when you greet one

another and have respect for one another -- as you commit yourself anew to the things that God expects us to accomplish through this congregation. And before I walk away from the sacred desk, let me number among the things that delight me as you give regard for this commandment -- you may not have thought much about it -- but I'm delighted when I realize that we belong to a church where almost every Lord's Day without exception a group of our precious young people head for the National Lutheran Home and spend a portion of their day in paying attention to older people, sharing a bit of God's love and concern. You ask me how to keep the day holy? -- any number of ways by which it can be done. And this too should be numbered among them . . .

. . . as significant as anything that ever happened at Bethany was after we had an in-depth retreat session there . . . a woman left Bethany and went right to the home of a member who was house-bound, gave her a bath, prepared her meal for the next day . . .

How do you please God? - - by obeying His commandments, and paying attention to one another.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

A GOD WHO CAN CRY

luke 19:41

In company with some of you I have had the good fortune of having a dream fulfilled by being able to visit the Holy Land. I'll never forget the first time I had such an experience. Our small company, there were only twelve of us in number, arrived and went to a small hotel not far from the Mount of Olives.

I remember several things about the hotel in particular.

First, was its location.

Secondly, the fact that it seemed that we were given individual attention by the hotel staff . . . not surprisingly so -- we were the only ones in the hotel! There were only twelve of us occupying the entire structure. The tourist season had not yet begun, and so we were the ones who were the object of the staff's undivided attention.

But the thing that impressed me most, or even more so, was the name of the hotel. It was called the Hotel Panorama...and aptly so. The hotel was so situated that we were constantly given a broad and complete view of the ancient walled city of Jerusalem.

Quite naturally, as you might suppose, I had deep thoughts whenever I would stand at the door of the hotel and look across the valley and see the Holy City. And as you can readily understand, so much of it comes back to me today as I stand in this place. For that is precisely what a trip to the Holy Land can do for a person -- enable them to identify more fully with so much that occurred in the life of our Blessed Lord.

Your patience, then, please, as I reflect on this Palm Sunday on that day in the life of Jesus -- when He beheld the panorama, the Holy City of Jerusalem, and was about to enter it in a most dramatic fashion. There is a text for this brief meditation, the 41st verse of the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And when he was come near, he
beheld the city and wept."

Let's see if we can get it in sharp focus. He was, as you know, God come to us in human form....which is to say, He was a man. And He was every inch a man. And now, generally speaking, men are not given to crying. Weeping, in the mind of some people, is equated with weakness, and as some folks would have it, the more

masculine a person, the less we would expect him to cry. With reverence and esteem they look upon Jesus as one greater than any ordinary mortal. Do we not also refer to Him as Christ the King? And do we not also associate with Him divinity, and call Him the Son of God.....or as the Creed-writers put the words to our lips: "Very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father"say it again and again if you dare -- men, generally speaking, are not given to crying. And a king -- why should a king ever cry? Doesn't a king have everything that he wants? And if he doesn't have it for the moment, isn't there always some way within reason to get it? Men, generally, do not cry....kings seldom, if ever.

God -- why would a god cry?

No matter what you make of it, God who came to us in the form of Jesus Christ shed tears when He beheld the city on that first Palm Sunday as He was about to enter Jerusalem.

Your experience and mine has taught us that some people cry for no reason at all. It just seems second nature to them. But there are others who when they cry have a reason.....

-- some will cry because physical pain is far greater than they can bear....and bodily affliction weakens the mind and the spirit so much that the tears cannot be held back...

-- some people cry because of the emotional burden of life, and when the heart is heavy -- no matter how good and brave a person may be -- tears have a way of coming, and if not in public, then at least in private....

Some people cry because of their own pain, some people cry because of the pain of others . . . and occasionally a person whose joy is great may be moved to tears. Jesus wept. Why did He cry?

On the surface, presumably, there's hardly any reason why He should cry. As far as He's concerned, everything is going according to plan. His destination from the very beginning had always been Jerusalem. He wanted to ride triumphantly into the city. And now all of this was about to take place. As the prophets before Him had demonstrated, so the crowds would gather around Him, and they'd shout their hosannas, and they'd salute Him as He rides on a donkey. He never had a day quite like this. He even encouraged it, initiated it. Should this then be for Him a time to cry?

He wept. But they were not tears of joy. And He had His reasons for weeping -- knowing the true nature of people like you and me, He could see beyond the crowd's shouts of "Hosanna" to their cruel, callous cry of "Crucify!" And so when He cried He did not cry for Himself. He cried for the people that He came to serve.

And that's the line of difference between His tears and ours. We cry so easily for ourselves -- how easy it is for us to wallow in our self-pity, to feel sorry for our condition. Not so with Jesus Christ. When He cried He cried for other people, and not for Himself. When He beheld the city He wept for the people, the ones who would reject Him.....

...He cried for the people who would forsake Him
...He cried for the disciples who would deny Him
...He cried for the disciple who would betray Him
...He cried for the people who would crucify Him
...He wept for the people to whom God had given the
freedom of choice, and rather than choose good,
they chose evil.....

And there would be nothing that He could do about it except allow Himself to become vulnerable.

There is no secret about this. You know it as well as I do -- there are some of you here this morning who know exactly what I'm talking about, especially if you're a parent. For more than thirteen years you have placed in my shepherding care hundreds upon hundreds of young people. And more often than I care to remember I've stood with some of you as parents and wept, as you've seen your teenager trying to express some new-found freedom, foolishly use it to reject, to deny, to forsake, to betray the way of truth and goodness -- even to the point of preferring the Devil to Christ. And there wasn't a thing you could do about it, nor I, except to become vulnerable.

So we're all children in the eyes of God, and all too often disobedient children. Palm Sunday reminds us of our Heavenly Father who either stands in the sidelines and waits....or who is pushed and shoved about, nailed to a cruel cross, until we have done with our foolishness.....

"And when he beheld the city he cried . . ."
...but not for Himself. He cried for us.

For some people that's a mind-blowing idea of God. Our image is of God being so powerful and mighty. A God who cries - - a God who cries for us? What would your life be like, do you suppose, if you didn't believe in a God who cries? If you didn't believe in a God who sometimes sees our condition through the tears of His eyes? For us to have a God who cries is for us to have a God who is not detached from our life, but He's so involved that when we fail Him He's vulnerable to our sins. No other religion in the world has a God like that - - a God who cries, and not for Himself....

.....who cries for people that He wants to save
.....a God who when He looks in your direction,
as He looks in mine, occasionally will weep . .

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"EASTER - AN EXPERIENCE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 20:1

The text - the 1st verse of the 20th chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"Then the first day of the week, Mary
Magdalene arrived at the tomb, while it was
still dark, and noticed that the stone had
been taken away . . . "

The title, if you need one, simply this: "EASTER - AN EXPERIENCE."

Contrary to what some of you may think, an Easter sermon is not easy to preach.
I'm not reluctant nor embarrassed to say this at the very beginning, so let me repeat it: Contrary to what some of you may think, an Easter sermon is not a very easy sermon to preach.

I know very well that Easter is the central truth of our Christian faith, and that every creed that we have written declares it. And no preacher dares to be silent on this day of days -- nor dare you! And that's why we include it in our worship at a most propitious point, an opportunity for every voice to be triumphantly heard and joining in echo wherever Christians gather on a day such as this: THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! It's something that we believe. Do we?.....or do we?

Let me be as honest with you as I possibly can be, and you return the compliment -- you be honest with me. And let's be fair, very fair, with each other. I have the feeling that if I asked this question of every one who is present right now, if I asked the same question.....if I were to leave this pulpit and walk down the aisle and go from row to row, and if I looked each one of you in the eye, and if I could, call you by name - - - "Do you honestly, without any doubt or hesitation -- do you fully, completely, perfectly believe on your own, not on the basis of what some have told you or what you've read or what you've seen - - - that a 33-year-old-car-

penter, put to death as a criminal, placed in a grave with a huge boulder rolled against it, came back to life after three days -- almost two thousand years ago?

I will not proceed in that manner, so you can relax. Time alone would not permit such an interrogation, or testimony, as the case may be. And frankly speaking, I suppose I could honestly say that some of you would react a bit awkwardly and think the whole exercise in poor taste. While others of you, I have reason to believe, would applaud it. And having been with you as long as I have, and being the son of a parsonage, I'm going to presume to tell you how I think or predict what the responses would be, had I gone pew to pew from person to person....and each of you would have responded.

Please understand that to a large degree what you're now going to hear has pretty much been determined by conversations that some of us have had, or has been pretty much determined by the way I've seen you behave in a time of crisis, when personal faith is either evident or it isn't.

First now, the greater majority -- could it be 70-80-90% or more -- I think would speak up. It could be that my estimate may be off a bit....but the greater majority would speak up with positive conviction....

...and a few of you, here and there, would probably break into song in a true charismatic fashion without waiting for your non-compatriots in the spirit to be bold -- they would spontaneously join you. And what you might lack in any evidence of numerical strength, your rapturous response would resound to every corner of the Nave....and with a display of restrained fervor, with a measure of unembellished affirmation, by far the greater number of you would answer with whatever variety of individual personality your temperament would reflect.

Then there would be, I dare say, a second group among us, a small percentage, and I shan't begin to predict a figure -- who would not answer with any degree of

enthusiasm. And before I say another word, you should know that as I assume them to be honest, I have no trouble at all in respecting their complete candor. They are the ones who would answer, in all likelihood, in this manner:

"I would like to say that I believe, but I have problems with the whole thing. I can't understand how it could happen. If a person dies, he's dead! I just don't understand it. It really isn't a case of my being able to honestly say that I believe.... nor is it a case of my honestly being able to say that I don't believe it "

It's to these people that this sermon is primarily directed, an honest attempt on my part to be as helpful as possible. People who have questions like this cannot be ignored.

A great preacher once dealt with this very issue far better than my limited years of experience can offer you, and he did a masterful thing. He spoke first of the fact that most people have no difficulty in accepting the crucifixion -- it's the resurrection that they can't understand. As an example he cited: "With the cross we deal with sin, suffering and death. Most of you, " he said, "know something about all three. You have sinned. And even you may not call it that, you've felt the twinge of conscience and you've done things that you know were wrong.....

...you've had your share of suffering, perhaps you've had more than your share. You know what it is to suffer from a broken heart....

....and you have been in the presence of death. Although you yourself have not yet been through it, you've seen others go through it. You've felt the chill of it.....

Easter -- the resurrection -- that has to do with something completely outside the range of your experience. You've never known anyone who has died and come

back to life . . . "

And I'm not thinking now of those rare instances where a person's heart stops beating for a few minutes, and then is made to beat again. The fact that there is nothing like it within the range of your experience is one reason why it's so much more difficult to speak about the Resurrection than it is to speak about Jesus' crucifixion. And presumably that's why more people than we care to admit say the Creed with their fingers crossed, as somehow they let the words slip from their lips.

Maybe it's because we live in the so-called scientific atmosphere that has something to do with our reluctance to say that we wholeheartedly believe. But we're the kind of people, you know, who never quite feel a thing is real unless we can explain it, or grasp it. There is something detrimental about our determination to have everything fully explained before we can stand to benefit by the experience itself.

My father, if he gets a chance to listen to the tape of this sermon, will probably be a bit jolted by what I'm going to tell you about a surmise of mine in his protracted illness. You know this illness of his has gone on now for more than five weeks. This is the first Easter in more than 45 years that he hasn't been in a pulpit....

-- this sickness has been overshadowed -- he probably won't like me telling you this, but I'm in the pulpit today . . . this sickness has been overshadowed by his constant wanting to have everything explained to him. He confronts his physicians, and my mother too, with all kinds of questions: What caused the condition?

...What's the medicine for? Does the dosage have to be so strong?....Why can't he sleep?....And why is he weak?Why didn't he get better three weeks ago?

...and all the while that he wants everything explained, he'd be far better off if he'd simply accept the fact that he's sick. Bluntly put, putting too much energy into trying to get an explanation can be crippling. Good things sometimes begin only after a person is willing to accept the experience as it is -- and then move from that point.

I am happy, by the way, to be able to report to you that the Senior Pastor's condition is improving. But the turning-point came when he accepted as a bona fide explanation the fact that he was nothing other than a sick man. (And parenthetically, if he hears a tape of this sermon he may be so mad he'll be out by Tuesday.)

But in all seriousness, to those of you who have trouble believing in the Resurrection just because you've never had it explained to your satisfaction, I can tell you this: chances are you will never have it fully explained to your satisfaction. I, as one of your pastors, freely admit -- I do not pretend to fully understand the Resurrection -- nor does that trouble me overmuch. There is so much that's clouded in mystery. But I am deeply grateful for all that God does reveal. And therein lies my hope and my joy and my faith. I have seen the love and the power of Christ come alive in countless people. No dead Christ could accomplish what I've seen happen in the lives of some of you into whose face I look this very moment.

I have been to Jerusalem. Along with some of you I have reverently gone to the Garden Tomb. Exactly what all happened that first Easter morning I don't know. Do you? Can you explain it fully? Can you explain it completely? That's not the point, really. What is important is not explanations, but the experience of the fact. And I want you to listen to these borrowed words which says it better than anything I could put together on my own: I do know that over Him who offered Himself in perfect obedience to the will of God, death has no dominion; sin had no claim whatever upon Him; evil never got the best of Him; suffering never soured Him. And in the end, death could not hold Him. I know that He is alive. And because He lives, you, I -- we -- shall live also. This I most certainly believe.

"ALL - - OR NOTHING"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

hike 10:25

The title for today's sermon is a very simple one, consisting of three words: "ALL - - OR NOTHING;" and the text, from the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and
tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I
do to inherit eternal life?
He said unto him, What is written in the law?
How readeest thou?
And he answering said, Thou shalt love the
Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with
all thy soul, and with all thy strength,
and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as
thyself. . . ."

Tell me now, in the final analysis, how would you like to be remembered if one were to put you in this kind of category: Would you like to be remembered as the person who was able to ask the right question? - - - or the person who on occasion was able to give the right answer? If one could not do both, there's absolutely no question in my mind what I would prefer. I'd like to be remembered as the person who had the happy faculty to be able to ask the question that had to be asked.

So often in so many places and in so many different times a cause is lost because no one was either in a position or had the good sense to realize the basic question that had to be dealt with. Sometimes it's far better to be able to ask the right question, even though you may fail when it comes to giving some answers.

As an example: here is the question that was asked by a man who one day found himself in the presence of Jesus Christ and took advantage of it . . .

(Oh, I need to tell you quite parenthetically -- Harry Emerson Fosdick, when I was beginning my ministry, in my judgment was the only preacher worth listening to on national radio, and he did a magnificent job as being the pastor and the preacher of the famous Riverside Church in Manhattan. He used to say in jest that his

beloved father would tell some of his friends how much he wanted to go to Heaven...and then his friends would say to him, knowing him as they did and being the kind of person that he was - - -

"Just why do you want to go to Heaven?"

...and he answered, presumably in jest, this very unconventional answer:

"Well, I want to go to Heaven for this reason - - I want to be able to get a chance to get God over in a corner all by Himself and put a question or two to him that's been on my mind!")

I have reason to believe that when our Blessed Lord was here on earth any number of people waited for the chance to have Jesus Christ all by themselves, just to put to Him a question or two with which they had been wrestling.

That's about the up-shot of the basis for this text today. This fellow, as you want to say, was standing in line, and when the opportunity came he very forthrightly, as he had observed the human scene - - - remember now, astute enough to observe the human scene.....and to think how people made fortunes and lost fortunes, how people dealt constantly with their fears, their failures and their frustrations . . . how any number of people had yet to come to grips with the things that matter most....

...having observed all of that, quietly and calmly and very earnestly he said, "Jesus, what does a person have to do to have eternal life?"

...a free translation of that, if you don't mind, would be:

"How is it possible to have a measure of satisfaction, to know that when this life will all be over, that you didn't miss the important thing?"

I have told you repeatedly that the old rabbis had their own picture of Judgment, and that was, when a man would breathe his last -- never again be given the chance to go back and live his life all over again -- it's all over now -- it was that picture of Judgment, in the mind of the old rabbi, where God would be standing and confronting the person whose life had been lived and was all over... ...and the question-of-questions that would be put,

"Well, you had your chance. What did you make of it?
Did you make the most of it?"

I have been transparent with you from time to time as I've stood at this sacred desk -- you know that -- and I cherish the privilege that you allow me to be that way. None of you can understand sometimes the anguish that I know in my soul, when I have stood by a grave and walked away, and have been in a position to realize myself the potential in that person that remained untapped, the so-called endless amount of good that could have been let loose, the countless number of people whose lives could have been blessed . . . if only that person in his lifetime had made the most of it! -- had enabled the stamp of eternal life to have been reflected on every single day that he lived. This really is this man's question to Jesus Christ: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" - -

....what can I do to make the most of the
time that I have now and to feel that I
have dealt with the things that are of value?

Fortunately for our sake, this is a case, the asking of the right question...

Fortunately for our sake, the giving of the right answer.

You don't always get a winning combination like that! And Jesus replied with the utmost of confidence and assurance, "You already know! It's in the book -- how does it read?" . . . and bless his soul, he answered perfectly:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy
heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength,
with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself."

And I am willing to believe, had I been standing there, that I would have seen a smile as broadly as possible come over the face of Jesus Christ when He said, "You have answered correctly! That's it! Do this, and you will live! - - not just somehow, but you'll live triumphantly -- magnificently - - you will live life to the full!"

Now for the moment I am in duty bound to ask you to consider the nature and the character of that answer, that correct answer:

- - to love God with all your heart? -- with all your soul?

-- with all your mind, with all your strength?

-- and your neighbor as yourself?

Unreal, isn't it? Does it lie within the realm of possibility? You can't ignore asking that question.

What people fail to realize at times is that Christianity if of all religions, I dare say, the most demanding of religions. This is demanding a great deal -- not 10%....not 20%....not 50% - - - 100%.

Your pastors don't take this responsibility of interpreting this text lightly, especially when it comes, when the time is at hand to deal with our confirmands. You need to know that next Lord's Day and the Sunday that follows, your two pastors, and perhaps with the assistance of our newly arrived Assistant Pastor, Director of Youth Work - - we will be at Bethany, our Retreat House, where according to our custom there will be personal interviews with those young people, 9th graders who are anticipating confirmation within the shadow of this altar on Pentecost, the last Sunday in May of this year. We have been doing this now for a number of years. We have no right to allow them to become confirmed unless we as their pastors enter in with them some measure of understanding as to what's involved . . .

- - we give them to understand that when they stand here in the service -- as you know, you may remember it from your own youngster's confirmation -- we've devised it to make it as personal as possible, and Pastor David allows me the privilege, for which I am profoundly grateful, as he plans for the service . . .

...to look the confirmand straight in the eye and to put the question:

"Do you love the Lord Jesus and do
you promise to serve Him through
His Holy Church?"

If we haven't taught them before they most certainly get it in the interviews at Bethany, that there's only one acceptable answer. I don't mind telling you, we put the words on their lips, we tell them what the answer is. We have no choice -- we have no alternative. With every ounce of the preacher that lies within me, let me rise to this occasion now as I stand before you - - we are in duty bound to place before them the demand of Jesus Christ. For this is the moment when they go on record to allow the world to know in no uncertain manner that they are disciples of Jesus Christ. And we, your pastors, are in duty bound to allow them to know that Jesus Christ, their leader, is a demanding leader. So the question is put:

"Do you love the Lord Jesus and do
you promise to serve Him through
His Holy Church?"

...and we tell them the only acceptable answer:

"Yes, with my whole heart."

Now there are people -- you may as well know this, I've always tried to be as frank with you as I can -- there are some people who tell us that that's absolutely unrealistic. We even have some parents, non-members of the congregation

whose youngsters have become part of our life and of our spirit and who are caught up with the Christian life-style as we exemplify it....and the youngster wants to take the stand . . . and we even have some parents on occasion, who if they don't smile outwardly, they smile inwardly in a measure of ridicule -- unrealistic -- how dare you allow a 13-year-old or a 14-year-old to answer "Yes, with my whole heart"? -- the answer is simple: we have no alternative, by the authority vested in us in Jesus Christ.

As far as He's concerned, as a matter of record, it is all or nothing. So we try to interpret that to them in these personal interviews. We try to give them to understand that Christ does not want a 10% Christian....

- Jesus Christ doesn't want a 25% Christian....
- Jesus Christ doesn't want a 35% Christian....

....and sometimes when their parents are present for part of the interview, this gives us a marvelous opportunity to bring their parents into the picture. And if I am the one who happened to have married their parents, I say to the youngster, "Now when your dad and your mother stood in front of me -- your mother, I dare say, would have run out of church immediately if your father would have said, when I raised this question about faithfulness....according to the marriage vows, you know the conventional answer -- your mother would have run out of church, I dare say, if your father would have said, "I'll be faithful to you three nights a week -- but the remainder of the week, don't count on me!" This shouldn't be too hard for us to understand, this whole business of commitment, this whole business of all or nothing. It's the only real basis on which anything of integrity can have any validity.

But I know it's hard to understand, of course I do, because I too was once a teenager. And so I try to give them a reckless or a free translation of it by saying -- "with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, with all my strength, and my neighbor as myself" -- this is what it means:

- It meant that I'm to remember that I belong
to Jesus Christ
- It means that I'm meant to do what Jesus Christ
wants me to do, no matter where I may be, no
matter with whom I may be, and regardless of
the condition or the circumstance or the situa-
tion at hand . . .

Now, what's unreasonable about that?

And the grand and glorious thing about it is this: that when Jesus Christ asks us to make a promise, He says, "I'll help you to keep that promise." -- and

that's the advantage that the Christian, the disciple always has.

In these very helpful sessions that we had in the Great Hall, or the "Town Hall" meeting, a week ago -- the answers that you got to the questions that you asked....none of the three of us knew how the other was going to answer. The answers were all completely unrehearsed. Each one was on his own. And I was pleased beyond words when one person answered and said, when he was asked about whether he could fulfill the responsibilities that were being asked of him, and whether he was being apprehensive.....he simply answered: "Of course I'm apprehensive. But by your help and by the help of God I'll give you the best I have."

Now we're all in this thing together, at whatever level you may be. You're not a confirmand? . . . You're beyond that age? You're a maturing Christian? Well, let me ask you the question: How are you doing? How are you faring? Suppose Jesus Christ returned and said, "You're right, you shall love me, you shall love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, with all your soul -- -- how are you doing?"

...happy indeed is that person who could stand up and say, "Not as well as I would like, but far better than I thought I could if it wouldn't be for your help!"

....and that's a happy thought.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

May 9, 1982

"THE CHRISTIAN HOME - A 4-D AFFAIR"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

hbk 2:52

Let me make you privy at this point to the kind of obstacle course, which, figuratively speaking, I have run as I've come to this sacred desk this morning. Being made perfectly aware that this is the Sunday marking the Festival of the Christian Home, there were a variety of topics that I could have addressed this morning, and all fall within the broad spectrum of the home from this Christian perspective.

I could have, I suppose, trying to make the sermon as relevant as possible, talked about the working mother, the mother now who spends a considerable amount of her time away from home. My friend, Alvin Rogness, who once preached from this sacred desk, a class-mate of our beloved Harold Lovre, when they were at St. Olaf together, has written a book in which he says: "Today fewer than 16% of the American families have a full-time home-maker/mother." Says Rogness, "I have no statistics for fifty years ago, but I suspect percentages would be at least reversed, more than 80% of the homes then had full-time mothers.

I suppose I could have spoken to you about that.

But then I also know I could have run the risk of being misunderstood, for there are homes where the mother needs to find fulfillment beyond the walls to which she can be so easily confined. And at times it's an absolute necessity that she become a working mother, perchance because the husband has abandoned her and the children -- to say nothing of the apparent need to get kids through college these days and to maintain the standard of living that they feel they ought to maintain. There is something to be said for the working mother.

But the problem **needs to be addressed**, but in a very wholesome way. Happy indeed is that person who at one time or another, perhaps may have to defer a while until she can do it, who can do both! Quite frankly, I would have been at a loss personally if I could not have had for the past 22 years, as my personal secretary, a working mother who fulfilled her responsibility to her husband and to her children, and to her grandchildren and to her neighborhood at

the same time. In fact, in jest at times I tell her -- as far as her family is concerned, she's a veritable matriarch! -- she's succeeded that well.

So I suppose as I come to this sacred desk this morning I could have spoken about the working mother, from the Christian perspective.

Or I could have spoken, realizing the contemporary scene, about the single parent -- more and more children are finding themselves dependent upon one person to fulfill the role of both father and mother. What does the Christian church have to say about this kind of thing?

Would you be surprised if I were to tell you that I was also tempted to come and preach a good old-fashioned rousing Mother's Day sermon in which I would exalt the attributes of motherhood in no uncertain way. For when it's all said and done, there is no substitute for the role of a mother. Occasionally it may have to be done by a surrogate, somebody who is called in to do and to perform and to relate to children as only a mother can.

When God saw fit to visit this earth, He placed into the hands of a woman a baby -- and entrusted her with a measure of responsibility that she did not give to any other person! To the end of time there will always remain this unique relationship between a child and a mother.

It can be expressed in different ways. Our son Jon -- he sent his mother a Mother's Day card last year (she'll be getting another this year, of course, he's quite faithful in that regard)

- - I would have been very happy if had sent her a card that said, "When I think of you I think of all the times you took me to church"

- - I would be very happy if he would have sent a card and said, "I want to thank you for teaching me all those Bible stories" (which she did)

-- "for all the time you nursed me when I was sick, doing for me what only a mother could do . . ."

....Jon isn't much given to talking like that. But he did send her what I think was a superb compliment, typically Jon....

The outside of the card said: *You're still the first person that I think of . . .*

...and on the inside it read: When I fall down and go boom!

There is that unique relationship, that in the time of the jolting experience or in the time of joy, mostly in the time of need -- "Mother! Mother!"

Or I was tempted to come to the sacred desk this morning and to tell you the sermon bears the title: "Mary - Only A Home-maker." I'm annoyed by people who say they're somewhat embarrassed when they're called to put down some kind of classification as to: What do you do? -- and they put down: "only a home-maker, only a housewife" I can't think of anything more noble -- no distinction for a woman that could be greater.

We had a friend one time come and address the members of the staff at a Lenten noonday luncheon. She touched on this sort of thing. She said, "I've reached the point now when people ask me, What is your profession? -- I put down Consultant My husband is always asking me for this...my children are always asking, where did you put it?" Mary, remember, she was -- God be praised -- only a home-maker.

Rogness also tells in a book that he's written that I cherish, how he was one of six children, his wife was one of six children, and together he and his wife had six children . . . and together those three women reared and trained eighteen persons and sent them out into the world, having on their souls indelibly stamped the image of Jesus Christ. He sang the praises of his mother, his wife and his mother-in-law. And he goes on to say that as far as he's concerned, if a man could be a success as a father in God's sight, that could be something far more wonderful than even being President of the United States of America or First National Bank. And that's something to think about.

There's a text for today's sermon: the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, it's the "model home" if you will -- the closing verses of that second chapter:

" . . And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

The two verses go together. Always remember that. Because it was at Nazareth, and it was in that home in Nazareth, where He was provided the environment, where He could grow up, in the four-fold fashion -- pleasing God, and pleasing man.

But what I have come to this sacred desk to do this morning is to share with you the kind of a sermon that in a certain sense a number of you have written for me. I have had the unusual good fortune in these four decades and more that I have been in the ministry to perform more marriage ceremonies, I think, than the

average pastor is able to perform. And I think that's true for a number of different reasons. In the first place that I served we had a very beautiful chapel that has a spot where they would be married. whether they were churchd or not churchd. It became to that section of the county what the "Little Church Around the Corner" is to New York and to the nation. And even on that Christmas Eve in World War II, when Johnnie came marching home, and his dream could be realized, he could be married -- he wanted to be married on Christmas Eve. Even though I had a service at 11:00 o'clock on Christmas Eve that year, I had wedding services in the Little Chapel of the Good Shepherd at 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 o'clock.across the years marrying people.

And our custom has been, as you well know by this time, a couple just doesn't get married. There's always the interview that's necessary. And the Lutheran Church maintains in classic tradition that a pastor has no right to perform a marriage ceremony unless I can be convinced it is a union upon which the blessing of God can rest. Now a free translation of that would be "where the pastor has reason to believe that there is commitment to each other in the name of God, and where the future will augur well for this couple. And if he can feel free to do that, then he should go ahead and perform the ceremony.

Well, I ascertained this sort of thing with the interview, as your pastors do, and then if I'm convinced that there's no reason why the ceremony can't be performed, I conclude the interview by saying: "And I will now ask from you two promises. I am willing to marry you because I have faith in you -- don't ever forget that. But there are two things that I think I should exact from you, and these lie within your realm, now:

One is: that if you don't have a church home, you find one, and you establish a relationship with God. The closer you are to God the better your marriage will always be.

And that's why Pastor David and I, when we re-wrote the marriage service we use here in Saint Luke Church, when the vows are being exchanged and the question is being addressed to the spouse, either one, the person doesn't simply answer: "I will" -- but **we've introduced the words: "I will -- by the help of God."** Many marriages perhaps can succeed fairly well without God's help. It's risky business to try without, however, and we fervently believe, then, that that should always be incorporated. Well that's the first promise: Will you find a church home? Will you go on thinking in terms of God?

And the second promise that I exact is this. I don't want to frighten you --

I give them to understand that I have been married now for four decades myself -- I don't want to frighten you, but you may have times when you won't always see eye to eye, and you will have differences and you will have difficulties.

Please don't throw in the sponge. I'm marrying you because I have faith in you, and if I'm still around when you have a problem, don't think in terms of splitting, but get yourselves back here to me, and we'll do the best that we can to look at the thing together.

Well now, a surprising number have come back. And on the basis of what I have heard, and how I put my finger upon their pulsebeat, I am going to share this sermon with you. . . .

One - I'm convinced that a marriage can succeed if people will allow themselves to believe that there can be deficiencies. There is no such thing as a perfect marriage. You can't possibly have a perfect marriage because you don't have two perfect people! Now this is a salutary point at which to begin. How much grief some of us could save ourselves if only we would begin at that point, and not allow ourselves to look for perfection in the mate. If you want to look for perfection, begin first by looking at yourself! So marriage is a 4-D affair. First you recognize the fact that there are deficiencies, there are imperfections. And if you ever have the happy notion that once you marry him you can reform him, get rid of that notion. You don't marry people to reform them. God be praised if through their association with you they can receive something they ought to have -- then that's a different story.

Point one, I've discovered as I've talked with them: that there are deficiencies and imperfections - - never moreso, perhaps, did it become as clear to me as when she said, "Now that I've told you my side of the story, let me tell you his."

Point Number Two if you please: I've discovered, as I've talked with people, that whether they recognize it or not, they really are dependent upon each other. And that's the hardest thing in the world for them to admit sometimes. This is why God thought of marriage in the first place -- it is not good for man to be alone. He needs some one person, who can be to him as nobody else can be. He (or she, as the case may be) has certain needs, and each of us is dependent upon that other person. And when God puts us within the frame-work, the intimate relationship of two people, how marvelous it is that when that specific need that that person has could be met by his mate.

I once counseled a man who, as I discovered, it became crystal-clear --

needed a kind word every now and then. Not often. But every now and then. He gave me to understand that he was married to a person who was always down-grading him. Pathetically he said to me as he left my study, "Pastor, I think our marriage could have been saved -- if only once she would have said to me (and I use this name just out of the blue) -- Clarence, that's a nice tie you have on this morning . . . if only once!"

I read once about a mother who discovered that her children were dependent upon her -- she discovered it in her relationship with them, that when they came home from school and they walked into the house, and the aroma that would go throughout the house as they would open the door that could give them a wonderful feeling that their homecoming had been anticipated, and a meal was being prepared . . . and would you believe it, by her own admission she said, "One time I discovered when I didn't have anything to do that might represent the kind of thing that they would like to smell when they came into the house, because we were going out for dinner . . . and I still felt that maybe they ought to have something . . . I put a couple of onions into the oven to bake so that they could smell when they came home the aroma of baking onions....."

The third D in this 4-D affair which marriage I say is: the recognition that we are different people. They come to me and I say, "What's the trouble?" "Pastor, we're no longer compatible." "Well, what do you mean, you're no longer compatible?" "Well, we're different."

Would you believe me if I were to tell you that among other things, that's what's preserved my marriage! Winifred and I are different. Different in personality and different in temperament. We've discovered it to be an asset, not a liability. What a salutary thing it could be if one could begin at that point, when he recognizes the fact that we are different -- that it could become a strength and not a liability.

Let me read for you something that I clipped twenty-one years ago, written by a Quaker friend, and I can only say as each time I read it, I wish I could have written it as well . . . "Differences of taste and temperament need not destroy the bond of marriage if there is a determination to succeed. If a community of interest has not developed between a husband and wife, a workable marriage can still be achieved. Individuals with a sense of dignity and with a feeling of responsibility can make an asset and strength of their differences in order to create a good home for their children. I know this from personal experience" . . . and listen to what she has to say . . .

"My mother was very devout, spending what little time she could reading

literature of inspiration....my father read nobels...

My mother loved classical music and church hymns....my father liked gay popular music and folk songs...

My mother's week turned around her attendance at church....my father seldom went to any religious service...

My mother didn't care about picnics, though I must say she packed a lunch basket full of fried chicken and homemade bread, and sometimes went along on our country outings....my father loved the woods and the fields, knew every tree and flower and bird in Illinois...

My mother thought that whatever was worth doing was worth doing well....my father would mend a broken fence with whatever piece of old lumber or bailing wire that was at hand....

My mother was reserved....my father was affable and outgoing, enjoying card games and croquet....

This is enough to indicate that they might have dissolved their marriage on the grounds of incompatibility. But they stayed together and gave their five children affection and security . . . "

(listen to this -- here is a gem)

"We went to our mother with our troubles. We went to our father to the movies, and on wonderful expeditions in the spring to see the new-born lambs and the tiny calico pigs....in the fall to gather hickory nuts and persimmons. Each parent made an important contribution to the life of the family. We learned at early age that there is not just one kind of behavior essential to a good life, nor one philosophy compatible with the search for truth. . . "

The fourth D in marriage is a 4-D affair: Devotion....commitment to one another. Devotion....commitment to God. Absolutely essential, as I've listened in on human hearts. I say to them, the closer you are to God the nearer you can be to one another. But this business of knowing how to be near to one another and yet respect one another's differences? Well, Dr. Philip J. Guran, a nationally-known family therapist, talks to couples about their marital problems. He cites the example of the two porcupines trying to keep warm on a very cold day. When they huddled too closely together, they wounded each other with their quills....when they moved too far apart, they got cold. Their goal: to get close enough to keep warm without being hurt by each other. Only God can teach us the secret how to highly regard each other, to be drawn to each other, to recognize the differences, and to allow God to allow the space that exists between us to become the bond, and not a separation. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NOW ABOUT SIN - - "

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

1 John 1:8

I must confess to you I'm a bit reluctant to announce the title for the sermon, after hearing the word spoken at the lectern before the singing of the middle hymn -- words and music together which remind us of the perfectly beautiful world in which God has placed us. You see, the title for today's sermon is "NOW ABOUT SIN."

But after all, you see, it did start in a garden, an idyllic one at that. The text is the 8th verse of the 1st chapter of First John:

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves
and the truth is not in us."

Whatever happened to sin? Nothing really. It is still around -- as much as ever if not moreso. The trouble is many people recognize it only as they see it and the results of it, by whatever name, in the lives of other people. Few of us are comfortable at branding ourselves in the classic language of the Church as "poor, lost, condemned, miserable sinners." To the contrary, we're mostly inclined to ask God, and people generally, to think rather highly of us.

As I stand at the sacred desk this morning I am in a position to tell you that it's a matter of historical record that the mother of Charles W. Elliot, one-time President of Harvard University, who when she heard that a friend of hers had joined the Episcopal Church, wrote her a letter, and began in this manner:

"Dear Elisa (that was her name) - - They tell me you have joined the Episcopal Church. Now honestly -- you don't get down on your knees in church, do you, and call yourself a miserable sinner! This kind of thing I will never do, nor any member of my family . . . "

....that was the mother of Charles W. Elliot, one-time President of Harvard University.

She must have had a distant cousin who was one time a member of this congregation, because I remember when a group was being prepared for membership in this parish -- about 20 years ago the group met in what is now the Seminar Room. And as we were meeting for the last time before the group was going to join the next

Sunday, intelligent, sophisticated -- she said to me in no uncertain manner, "I'll be joining, but I am not to comfortable about what happens in Saint Luke Church every Sunday. You see, Pastor, we're no sooner inside the walls then you have us standing on our feet and you have us say that we've sinned against God!"....she spoke very freely and frankly . . .

She said, "Really now, I don't consider myself a sinner. At least I am in church....I am going to join in singing the hymns....I do pay attention when God's Word is read, and I try to get something out of the sermon when it's being preached....and when the offering plate goes in front of me I put my part into it -- I don't consider myself a sinner . . . all those other people who haven't come, who don't pay attention to God's word, who don't try to get something good out of a sermon, who don't financially support the work of the Kingdom -- they're the sinners, Pastor."

It took a bit of doing, but I honestly believe I did say something that was helpful, if only to quote for her the text which is the basis for all that you're going to hear in the next 15 or 17 minutes from this sacred desk.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us"

Bernard Shaw wrote a play called "Dr. Kannoek" and I remember one of the lines - - "If you say that you are well, it's only because you do not know that you are sick." Theologically speaking, it's pretty much that way with our sinful nature. If we say that we are well, it's only because we have yet to discover that we are by nature sinful and unclean.

But honestly now, generally speaking, we shy away from calling ourselves sinners and shy away from thinking of the concept of sin, and there are reasons.

Reason Number One: When we talk about ourselves being sinners it suggests repression -- unnatural suppression of so much that we enjoy. You see, we have reared a generation of young people whose by-word, if not verbally at least by their acts, - - "If it feels good, you do it!" When we talk about our sinful nature, we are in duty bound to talk about our limitations then that are placed upon our freedom. We're not at all unhappy about the unfair restrictions on our rights to make the most of the few years that we have here on earth -- we want to do it our way. we want to do things that are pleasing to us.

I like to think sometimes, it's not an accident that the middle letter, the central letter in that word SIN is I - - because that's what sin is --

man putting himself up in opposition to God. God said to him at the very beginning, "This is what I don't want you to do . . ." But Adam and Eve got their heads together and said, "No matter what God says, this is what we're going to do." And we have been paying the price for that kind of thinking ever since.

And when we talk about sin, it gives us an imagery of God -- it's not a very healthy one, at least for some people, -- don't get me wrong...

...when I was a youngster, didn't I have that concept of God, sitting there in Heaven with that great big book in front of Him, with His pen in hand, those blank pages....
...and all of a sudden there was a page that had my name on it, and when I would come to the time of Judgment He'd open the book to the page where my name is, and then what would He do? He'd go down and read all the times when I had disobeyed Him....

...when we talk about sin we talk about a God who has an eagle-eye. And whether we're honest with ourselves or not, we permit ourselves to believe that He gets a measure of delight in catching us -- "Ah, I've got you! -- You did it again, and you thought I wouldn't see -- but I did!"

And we're especially troubled with this idea of sin because most of the sinning that we do, we find quite enjoyable. Still as of old, stolen fruit is sweet! So we don't want to think about God, to talk about a God who takes away our pleasure, the things we enjoy.

Oh, the Puritans, they were masters of that, you know. Let me tell it to you again -- sure, I told you about it before, didn't I? -- it comes out of New England, Puritan New England....

....the preacher who had two preaching points, separated by some distance, with the stream of water between the two. And one winter's morn -- he lived close by the first preaching point -- when he went to go there and keep his assignment, he discovered that his horse was lame -- the only means by which he had to keep faithfully the appointment in the afternoon at the second preaching station. How, now, could he allow himself, in the quickest way, to get to that preaching point so that those people in the afternoon would not be denied the preaching of God's Word?

....well it occurred to him -- a lame horse that he couldn't ride....winter....the water was frozen. He'd skate from one

from one preaching point to the next. And that's exactly what he did....

...only when he arrived -- remember now, Puritan New England -- there were the deacons, and they saw him skating down this little stream. They couldn't wait to hold court -- "Skating on the Sabbath!" He thought he did a masterful job defending himself. He was in duty bound to preach God's Word, to keep this assignment that afternoon to be with the faithful. And for him skating was the surest way, and the quickest to get there. He thought he had won his point against the deacons who were bringing in offense against him. . . . until one old deacon, looking him straight in the eye, with that crooked finger, said to him, "Tell me, before I cast my vote -- tell me -- did ye enjoy the skating?"

There are people who have that concept of God -- who doesn't want us to be happy, who doesn't want us to enjoy this life. We get Him wrong, you see -- go back to that page that deals with the Garden of Eden -- what is God saying to us when He places us in this idyllic and perfectly beautiful place? -- "Make the most of it -- enjoy it! I call it -- good."

I suppose every single one of us has his moments when he thinks how he'd like to be remembered when his final chapter is written. I'm not at all ashamed to tell you that when I may no longer be among you here at Saint Luke, I should like some of you to remember, and especially those of you who are young, who are part of a catechetical experience, that we wanted always to have our young people to believe -- it's a joyful thing to be a Christian, to delight in the way of the Lord, to love Him and to serve Him, to obey Him.

There are some people, then, who shy away from sin, thinking about it, because you can't possibly think of sin without believing yourself as a responsible person -- God does hold us responsible for the way we live out the days of our years. And many people in this day and age never much concern themselves with that precious ingredient called responsibility. It's a very healthy, a very salutary thing to remember that as a Christian God holds me responsible.

So we as a people have dropped the idea of sin from our thinking as well as from our vocabulary. I saw we've dropped the idea, but the strange thing is that we can't, we really can't drop it no matter how hard we try, no matter how many people there are who will help us rationalize what we have done, and who will help us find reasons for dropping the idea of sin. We simply can't have done with it. We may get to the place where we accept sinning as a way of life --

- - everybody does it.....and then a terrible thing sets in -- we no longer become sensitive to it, we no longer become disgusted by it. Someone has penned this one-liner: OURS IS AN AGE IN WHICH CORRUPTION SELDOM PROVOKES DISGUST. We have gotten to the place where we expect it, we even look for it.

In Norman Jaspens and Mike Froholic's book, "The Thief In The White Collar" it's been estimated that each year some one billion dollars is stolen by the so-called white collar thief, the thief who steals from the company for which he works.....and that another five billion changes hands in the form of bribes, pay-offs, kick-backs, presents and other forms of dishonesty in business life. We don't call it sinning. We simply write it off -- as a bribe, a pay-off, a kick-back!....

....within the past decade loss claims in honesty insurance, the kind that covers the loss of money or goods stolen by employees, has risen by 250%...

....in the past 20 - 25 years, 105 banks have been forced to close because of embezzlement....

....at any given time the authors estimate that between 10 - 25 millions of dollars are missing in thefts that banks have yet to discover. This is the heinous thing about our generation: we've come to make terms of our sinful nature, and no longer become disgusted by it.....

....and even perchance to become offended when in church the ancient traditional liturgy reminds us "We are by nature sinful and unclean."

Professor Langdon Gilke, in his book "Religion in The Scientific Future" has written - - "A scientific age which has added immensely to our understanding and to our powers, has not made us more virtuous; nor has it made the meanings of our life any more secure. Our control over ourselves and our consequent control over our own destiny seems in no wise to be any more within our grasp than before. The old theological problems of the use man makes of his freedom, of his bondage to self-interest, and of the ultimate meaning of the human story have been dissolved -- neither by the physical nor by the life sciences....rather they have precisely increased by them."

Who was it who said, when he thought of all the technical advances that we've made in our day, sadly observed, "We are not good enough to be so clever."

There's a bright spot on the horizon, I dare say. Perchance I speak from

personal experience. While I have never been a stranger to sin, frequently victimized by it, I must confess to you, the older I become, the more convinced I am that in the time of judgment the words that will be voiced quickest from my lips as I face my Maker will be: "Lord, have mercy!" - - and therein may lie my hope!

Said Peter, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man." Confronted by Jesus Christ we see our wickedness. This I say to you quickly as I walk away from this sacred desk - - when He was here on earth, did it ever occur to you how seldom He pointed His finger at people and called them sinners? He accepted the fact that they were sinners, but as they were exposed to the beauty and the truth and the dignity of His life He won their hearts and brought a transforming touch. How fortunate - - for those of us who re-discover the fact of sin -- to re-discover the Saviourhood of God!

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE TWELFTH MAN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Acts 1:26

Today's sermon is based upon the first Lesson that was read this morning. It bears the title: "THE TWELFTH MAN" and the text, the 26th verse of the 1st chapter of the Book of the Acts of The Apostles:

"And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles."

You're fortunate, my friend, if you have what I am pleased to refer to as the gift of the sanctified imagination, which means that when you read Scripture, you try to identify as best you can with the incident as it occurred and to relate to the people involved. If we could employ that sanctified imagination now, I'd like to suggest that maybe it happened in this way: Peter, bless his soul, self-appointed leader, always constrained to speak, stands up and addresses his compatriots....and I suppose he puts it in this kind of manner:

"Do you realize what's happened to us in the last six weeks' period?" - - it's a salutary thing, you know, to do that every now and then, to look back and realize what all has occurred, and to try to bring it into some kind of proper perspective . . . and then to decide what the next step is that ought to be taken.....

That's always very important. It's never enough simply to look back, but one must also think in terms of the next step that has to be taken. And Peter began to tell them:

" . . . Do you remember that within this six weeks' period of time, our Master, whom we love dearly, was denied, betrayed, crucified - - and every single one of us numbered among the Twelve forsook Him and fled. But then there was the glorious Resurrection! -- and after the Resurrection He kept appearing and re-appearing to us in the strangest places, in the strangest ways, at the strangest times!

....now very recently, we were privileged to be with Him on the mountain-top, when we saw Him for the very last. And I'm in duty bound to remind you what He said to us. He was not speaking to people generally....but He did

speak to us, and said, 'Now you go, and you preach, and you teach, and you baptize, and you witness, and you make disciples...' ...now all of this has happened within a six-weeks' period, and I also find myself constrained to tell you that it's high time we fill a vacancy. One of our twelve, you know, disqualified himself . . . "

 ...and then he made some reference to Judas and his suicidal death.....

As you read that passage of Scripture, give Peter credit for this. He did not exploit Judas's miserable state. He did not grind him into the dust and say, "Rascal that he was, trusted by our Blessed Lord -- betrayer! - - - " He simply refers to the fact that he did what he did, and then makes them aware of the situation: " . . . as he disqualified himself, right now there are only eleven of us - - we ought to be twelve again."

Now I'm about to suggest to you that had I been present then, I think I'd have said, "Peter, I can't be as enthusiastic about your proposal as seemingly you are." . . . and Peter would ask me to explain myself, which I am about to do to you . . .

 ...I would have said, "Peter, if our Blessed Lord in all His wisdom chose one disciple among us who was a bad apple, figuratively speaking, if he was the dud that he was, what reason do I have to believe, Peter, that I can trust my wisdom in choosing somebody?"

 I think I would have answered that way.

Fortunately, as I read the record, presumably none spoke in that spirit or in that manner. But apparently they were all enthusiastic because they all proceeded to cast lots and to nominate two people, one of whom would be chosen.

Now the question needs to be asked: how do you suppose that was possible? May I suggest it was possible because every single one of them, as they thought of Judas Iscariot, the failure, thought of themselves as failures. Because it's a matter of Scriptural record that one denied....one betrayed....and every single one of them, when the chips were down, ran away. Where were they when He needed them most? So I have reason to believe that every single one of them knew the meaning of failure. And you and I need to recognize that. None of us will ever offer Him perfect obedience. For every single one of us who claims discipleship,

there is always - - let me say it again and ever so often - - - there is always the possibility of failure. None of us can guarantee Him perfect obedience. And I think they recognized that.

But what is more, you may not have recognized this - - but when Jesus Christ came back to them, appearing and re-appearing, what do you suppose happened? -- did you ever ask yourself that question?

- - let me propose to you that every now and then when He came back in those appearances and re-appearances, He came to a person, like Peter, put His strong arm around his shoulder and said, "Peter, you know that I know - - I remember how you said you'd never fail me - - I remember what I told you....and I remember how you boasted and said - even though others might, you wouldn't. But, Peter, you did!" . . . and then Peter could feel that strong gentle pressure of the arm of Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ turned and looked Him straight in the eye and He said, "But, Peter, you're still my man! You're forgiven, and we'll start all over again."

You may never have read it this way between the lines, but I suggest to you that it could have happened in that way - - as He went to Andrew....as He went to Bartholomew, as He went to every single one of them, one by one, at one time or another, putting His arm around them and speaking that marvelous word: "You are still my man."

Two things: There is always the possibility of failure - and -

There is always the assurance of God's forgiveness.

...and this I believe was firmly established in their minds as they re-grouped, became twelve again, and began all over.

You know the method, they cast lots. In those days they used stones, they scratched upon the stone that they had chosen the name or the initial of something that represented the name of the person for whom they wanted to vote. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit there were two people who were nominated - - then they shook the vessel or the container, whatever method they may have used -- maybe a hand went in and pulled one out, or they could have thrown the pebbles up and then decided whenever this pebble fell in this direction nearest to this person, that would be the one. Eagerly they awaited. The Scriptures say it was Matthias who was chosen.

From a human perspective now, how do you suppose the man who didn't make it felt? What kind of personality complex began to set in then? Or better still, how do you suppose Matthias felt about the man who wasn't chosen? Interestingly enough, we hear nothing about either one of them from that time on. We know nothing about what happened to Joseph Barsabas, nor do we know what kind of a disciple Matthias made.

But I am inclined to bring to your attention the fact that he was labeled "successor to Judas" - - and what do you suppose that meant to him? Was that a constant reminder that there was a cloud hanging over his head? -- that he was chosen to replace a man who had failed and who had failed miserably? -- and there was always within him the possibility of becoming a Judas? . . . a question worth asking. Worth asking for the simple reason that all of us become successors to Judas. Whenever there is a vacancy created in discipleship, all the rest of us are meant to do one of two things: take up the slack, or to find another to take his place.

I don't mind telling you that from time to time as I've stood at this Sacred Desk I've allowed myself to become fully transparent to you. I try to do it as circumspcctly as I can. There were six of us youngsters who grew up to become adults in my family. Little did we realize that there would be one among the youngsters, the brother next to me, who would be the one to die first -- brain tumor, lung cancer. In many ways he was the most vital of the six of us. It was a sobering experience for me, with all of its trauma, but I made up my mind that as God would give me the energy and the strength, I'd do my best to make up for the loss of his life, to live a bit more fervently, more earnestly, more seriously. Whenever there's a vacancy, there's that kind of demeanor that becomes a Christian.

And did it ever occur to you, my friend, that the Kingdom of God goes forward one generation at a time? Pastor David is perfectly correct and quite proper when he brings to our attention during the announcement period that when the newest recruits for the Kingdom walk this sacred aisle next Sunday afternoon at 5:00 o'clock, we will turn with a welcoming gesture, as much as to say: "We can't get along without you - - we need you! The troops have to be replenished!" And what is the criteria? - - a person who proclaims and recognizes the reality of the presence of Jesus Christ within his soul. Anyone can qualify as a successor to the person

who needs to be replaced as long as he meets that kind of qualification. The Kingdom of God is in need of people who can testify to the reality of Jesus Christ.

And how do you do it? One of these Sundays when I am standing at the lectern I am going to play for you a tape that I got from that adorable thing who accompanied us throughout our stay in China. She was 22 years of age April 1. We used to engage in conversation, as though she were trying to make me argue with her, because she was not a believer in God. I remember her saying to me, "Have you given up trying to convert me?"

....and my answer: "Lui, I don't convert you -- only

God can do that!"

In the letter that I received from her this week, she wrote some beautiful things. But then, honest as she is, she was constrained to say, "I still do not believe in God as you do."

When I write her, will I argue with her? Of course I shall not argue with her. And if I were to see her again now, face to face, I would hope for only one thing: that I could communicate to her my experience. That's the way it's done! That's why you and I are here, because there's been successor to successor to successor -- and the word continues to be spread and the reality continues to be established by the bona fide witness. . . . and that's something to think about.

* * * * *

"ON OBEDIENCE TO JESUS CHRIST"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Acts 1:4

There were eleven now....there once had been twelve. Which one of the twelve do you suppose it was who spoke like this? -- "I can't believe it! - - it just doesn't make sense to me!" - - sounds like Peter, don't you think?

Peter was always the one who didn't hesitate to speak what he thought; whether what he thought was worth speaking or not may have a different story. But in all likelihood it could have started a chain reaction, where one disciple turned to another and said, "Come to think of it, it doesn't make sense to me either."

You see, our Blessed Lord had just said to them - - well, let me read it for you in the classic King James, the 4th verse in the 1st chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles:

"And while staying with them, He
charged them not to depart from
Jerusalem, but to wait for the
promise of the Father"

It didn't make sense to them at all -- Jerusalem of all places to stay together! I can well imagine Peter saying to his Master -- "Don't you realize we'll be a bunch of sitting ducks! They tried to do you in as it was! Now if the authorities learn that we're all here together, what capital they'd make of that! -- with one swell stroke they'll annihilate all of us!--as long as we're all here together. I would submit that you think in terms of letting us scatter . . ." "Andrew, you stay at Joppa" - - "Simon Peter, you put up in Nazareth . . .".....so they could have said one to another. It made sense to them.

And our Blessed Lord, quietly and calmly, with all the confidence that forever became Him, so He would see it - - He would turn

to them and say, "But you still don't understand, do you? You're always trying to pit your wisdom against mine." - - - He may not have said it this way, but from our vantage-point we can put these words on His lips. The arrogance of human nature, to think that they know better than God! It's really been our problem from the very beginning. And so Jesus said, "I know what I'm talking about. You stay! Do I have to ask you to trust my wisdom? Have I ever failed you? Haven't all my predictions and my promises come true? If it doesn't make sense to you, then trust me for the fact that it seems wise to me. . . "

Now, this morning, as we're gathered here, we can see the wisdom of it -- His directive, His mandate, His "Stay! -- you don't scatter!" -- for the simple reason that they were not yet ready to be separated one from another. They needed to stay together for at least three reasons.

One - - They had to be unified by the Spirit, they had to be possessed by what only God could give them, and that gift was meant for each one of them. The time would come -- of course it would come -- when they would be scattered, particularly as they would remember His parting command. Then, when they would go, it might be an isolated situation when they could look back and remember what they had been given -- at a particular time, in a particular place, and as they were with one another.

When Martin Niemöller was for eight-and-a-half years the personal prisoner of Adolph Hitler, confined in that cell, there were several things that kept him sane: one, he kept reminding himself of that precious verse of Scripture, "Lo, I am with you always" . . . and the second thing: the encouragement he received as he remembered that there in that suburban Berlin parish that he served, day in and day out there was a handful of disciples, a handful of fervent believers who kept the prayer vigil -- he was knit with them in the bond of the spirit, and that sustained him....

....the day would come when they would be scattered, when they would be separated, but until that day would come they had to be unified by the Spirit so that they were stabilized in their isolation.

Did it ever occur to you how much you receive within these hallowed walls that holds you in good stead once you're separated one from the other? Why is it that God in His wisdom set us as solitary in families, if not for that reason? For the isolation may come, if not by distance, then by affliction, and sickness.

There was a second reason why He said, "You're not ready to go -- you stay!" -- because they had to grow in acceptance of one another, and that takes time. You're not forgetting, are you, that human as they were they could blame one another for what had happened. I can well imagine one of them saying, "Peter, you big-mouth! -- we leaned heavily on you. You were the one who spoke up and said, 'Lord, no matter what they may do, I'll always be found faithful' -- and struck a measure of encouragement when you spoke like that, Peter, you really did. But we remember what you did . . . " Tradition has it that every now and then people would walk up and surprise Peter and then begin to crow like a rooster, that he might be reminded of his denial of his Master. Can't you imagine how they were for a while, blaming one another....

"Had you remained firm in the faith, we would have remained firm in the faith! But, Peter, you chickened out, and they took the carpet out from under our feet -- they undermined our faith!"

....they blamed one another.

They needed time, now, to adjust to each other all over again, and to accept each other as Jesus Christ accepted each one of them in turn. It takes time to accept one another....it takes time to grow in a relationship that can hold you in good stead.

There is that precious moment in the marriage service as we conduct it, which is just before the bride and the groom exchange their vows. We offer a prayer, and that prayer has one simple, single thrust -- that they may grow in love and peace together as they may face the future. It takes time to grow in accepting one another. What they were doing now as they stayed in Jerusalem was like a shake-down cruise -- that's really what it was.

There is another reason why they were asked to stay in Jerusalem -- just to spend time praying -- yes....but also thinking and reflecting upon all that had happened, upon what they had received in their encounter with Jesus Christ our Lord and Master, and what they were receiving through one another. They needed time for reflective thought.

Did it ever occur to you that this is a basic weakness of our civilization -- we have so little time simply to think and to reflect. When the girl that I mar-

ried went to school there was no such thing as a school bus system. She and her compatriots walked from where they were. When school was out, they walked the country lane, maybe took the short-cut across the meadow....and all the time you could think, you could reflect upon the things that had happened as you spent that time in school.

It's only a dream and it will probably never, never come to pass....I used to think if God would give me the privilege of building an ideal church structure, I would hope that I could find sufficient acreage to have the parking lot removed to some reasonable distance from the church structure itself. Oh, I'd have a carriage drive for those who might need to be transported to the very door of the church for reasons of physical infirmity perchance, but otherwise my dream would be that once the benediction was pronounced, the recessional hymn was sung, they could walk slowly to their car....and as they would walk they could think, and reflect upon what they had experienced in the divine encounter within hallowed walls.

There are those who prize in Saint's like Church the quiet time before the service begins, and that brief moment when the service is concluded, when quietly you can assess and re-assess how the soul has been nurtured, the perspective that you've re-gained, the re-orientation for your life once you leave these sacred walls.....they need time simply to think and to reflect, so that when they would be scattered, they would be stabilized by what they had experienced in their thinking time.

And I'd suggest another reason why He asked them to stay in Jerusalem. Chances are there was prejudice on their part against Jerusalem. That was the place where Calvary was...that's where they did Him in. Think how long it took for a great city in this South to have its reputation renewed and re-established in the minds of many Americans as people remembered that it was in that city that the young John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Prejudices come up quickly! They are not easy to handle. So I could well imagine how some of them could have reasoned among themselves and said, "Jerusalem -- not for me! As soon as I can get away from it -- there I'll begin to practice my Christian faith. But don't expect me to practice it here!" -- no matter how sacred it was to their memory.

They needed time to reflect upon the fact that if you can't begin to practice the Christian faith where you are, chances are you can't practice it any-

There would be no training
the following year. They had already
courses. All kinds of things.
"You got it?"

Today, looking at the way things are working, they will be encouraged to say that they have made the most of what they have, still don't know the great difference between how we work and how they do it. But they will be encouraged to do this with the confidence that

1. The first of these is the fact that the
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"THE TOTALITY OF GOD"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Tell me, assuming you were here last Sunday, the Sunday before that and the Sunday before that - - what were the first words spoken by the officiating minister to this assembled congregation? . . . let me ask you this question: what were the last words as the benediction was being pronounced, that were spoken to a congregation that was being dismissed? It happens Sunday after Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Do you know what those words are?

Or by the same token I could ask you this question: if your mind could be as mine once was when the preacher would be preaching, as a youngster seated in that little church back amid the hills of home . . . my mind would begin to wander and I'd look around at the things that I could see up at the front of the church. And if you should be in that situation, what does this mean, this symbol, this drawing, this etching that you see at the highest point of the front of the church? It's there today....it was there last Sunday....it's been there now for 8 - 10 years. What does it mean?

In the Calendar of the Church today we celebrate the Festival of the Holy Trinity. It's the only festival that's set aside to pay tribute to a particular teaching of the Church. Now having said that, let me tell you this. As I remember it, it happened somewhere in Europe, as devout worshippers on their way to church, they walked that cobblestone path through a courtyard before they entered the narthex....

....year after year devout worshippers were seen to stop at a particular point. Before going one step farther, the head would be bowed, the sign of the cross would be made... I should tell you, the church in which they were about to worship was a church that was consecrated in the name of the Blessed Mother, but there was no physical reason, had you been there, as to why they should stop at that particular point and have this measure of respect.

A visitor one time came to that church and observed what was being done and asked one of the devout worshippers, "Why do you stop at this particular point, bow the head in humility and respect, make the sign of the cross, before you take another step forward?" He did not know.

Fortunately, as additional inquiry was made, he got this answer: when the church was consecrated, on that wall in the courtyard a highly gifted and skilled artist had done a fresco of the Blessed Mother and Child. And whenever worshippers came they always stopped at that particular point and gave veneration to the Blessed Mother before they advanced to the narthex of the church.

....the fresco, with the passing of time, began to deteriorate, it was scarcely discernable. They had decided it would be re-done, it would be restored. But there was no one in the community who was gifted and skilled enough to do what had to be done. So until the time would come when someone would be found, they placed a board over it, covered it up. But then, according to custom, as the devout worshippers came the next Sunday and thereafter, they'd do what they had been accustomed to doing, the act of respect and reverence... But as succeeding generations came, still yet not having found someone who could restore it, they stopped -- not knowing why -- and did what they did.

Now having said that to you, I am fully aware of the fact that on this Sunday that marks the Festival of the Holy Trinity, there are any number of people who say, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" -- and do not have a full appreciation either for the words themselves or for what could be represented. And because that happens to be true, I've set aside the sermon that I'd originally planned to preach on this, the first Sunday in June, because I'd like to talk with you as earnestly and as helpfully as I can regarding this fundamental doctrine of the Church known as the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Each service of worship in Saint Luke Church begins with those words, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" or "Holy Ghost"...and when the benediction is going to be pronounced, we will conclude in the same manner....

...,when a child is baptized, he is not simply baptized "In the name of God"

- - he is baptized "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" the couple that was pronounced husband and wife as they made their promises within the shadow of this altar yesterday, they were pronounced husband and wife "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"
- - - why do we cling tenaciously to these words?

When Bishop Pike, out there in San Francisco, wrote his book, liberal Episcopalian that he was, he didn't hesitate to include a chapter on the Trinity in which he maintained that it was "excess baggage" as far as the Church was concerned. We'd be far better off if we'd ignore it and have done with it -- it's confusing, and it's confounding, we'd be far better off if we simply talked in these terms: "In the Name of God" . . . period.

But we Lutherans cling tenaciously to the Trinitarian concept of God. Why? Let me be as helpful as I can possibly be.

I suggest to you, a person is as a person does. You can never really understand the basic nature and character of a person until you see that person doing something. Now, trying to probe the motivation may be another story, but to all intents and purposes you can tell very much what a person is like when you see that person in action.

As a very simple illustration, suppose you and I were confined to a room, just the two of us, we were encountering ourselves for the first time. As I stood and looked at you, you remained completely immobile for all the time that I encountered you -- you never so much as moved a muscle. What would I really know about you, except as by what I could describe regarding your physical features? But let a person begin to do something, and I may have some idea as to what the person is like. Make no mistake about it, the statement can be made: a person is as a person does.

Leslie Weatherhead was a great English preacher of another generation. He was Pastor of the distinguished, prestigious City Temple Church of London, a free church, a non-conformist church. On occasion he would worship with people of other traditions. Once he went to a Roman Catholic church in Birmingham. He relates for us what happened....

...before he entered the church he knew, of course, some of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and as they were celebrating Mass that day he fully understood, according to Roman Catholic teaching, that when the priest would take the

host, the bread, and elevate it, the devout Catholic would be led to believe that Jesus Christ's presence would be localized in that piece of bread. And if somebody were to press the point: "Where is Jesus Christ?" - - with profound respect the devout Catholic could say, as the priest was elevating the host - - "There is Jesus Christ."

Weatherhead relates for us in a very winsome way that as he was worshipping he observed an old man, a rather nondescript character who came in and took his place in the church. And that's all the attention he paid to him, until, shortly thereafter, a youngster, for some reason that Weatherhead doesn't relate, wandered rather aimlessly down the aisle of the church, frightened, bewildered, crying. It was the old man - - Weatherhead had no reason to believe that he was related to the child - - it was the old man who got up, and walked down the aisle of the church very carefully -- not to frighten the youngster.....and when he was close enough, with his big strong, yet tender, arms embraced that child, soothed and comforted the child, carried it in his arms and went back and consoled the youngster.....

Weatherhead, not being disrespectful, said, "To some people God was up there in the hands of the priest in a piece of bread. But for me," said Weatherhead, "when that old man came forward and embraced that child, it was as though the very arms of God were touching that child."

...Weatherhead could never have said that had the old man remained immobilized, firmly seated on that pew, but when he did what he did, Weatherhead could come to that conclusion with kind and warm thoughts as to the person's basic character. A person is as a person does.

God is as God does.

Now what do you know about God's actions? What do you know about God's deeds? For some people there is only a partial understanding, and that's why we consider ourselves fortunate in the doctrine of the Trinity. We're constantly reminding ourselves of the totality of God's deeds - - of all that He has done and continues to do. We short-change ourselves if we think only in terms of God's partial acts. As an example: some people have no difficulty in accepting the fact that God created the world. They begin...and end at that point: God's the Creator, the Master-Mind, the Prime Force, the Central Architect. They have no difficulty at all in accepting that. But they don't accept much more beyond that point.

As we Lutherans base what we preach and teach according to Scripture, the

Bible introduces us to a God who does something more than create the world. The Bible introduces us to the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the Bible reveals the basic nature of Jesus Christ as God-come-to-us-in-human-form -- to prove and to show to us what God is really like.

As youngsters in Sunday School you know the three-word definition we had for God: "God is love." Now you ought not to have any trouble at this point -- love, properly understood, is never detached from the object that's being loved. You can't take a long-distance attitude toward someone that you love. You can't allow yourself a detached concern towards someone you love. So God did something -- "Behold, I will both seek and save my people -- I will be to them as the shepherd" Ezekiel says about God -- "I will come to them, I will save them." And every time we exercise this Trinitarian concept of God we're reminding ourselves that God did not simply create the world but God had a continuing interest.

When we were heading toward Hell, God said, "You were not meant to go to Hell -- and I will come and keep you from going to Hell by the love that I will demonstrate for you -- sacrificial love.

God is as God does. If we simply thought in terms of creation, we would be short-changing God as far as totality of His actions is concerned. So God came to us in human form and every time we use the words of the Trinity we remind ourselves that the Father-God has a Son, and the Son came to us where we happen to be.

We who cling to the Trinitarian concept of God do not worship a God who is separated from us, exalted in the heavens. The Trinity keeps reminding us that He's a God who identifies Himself with us -- no detached, no God-in-absentia.

Now how could you know this? Because of God's continuing concern, a continuing concern that did not stop with the birth of Jesus Christ, the life and death of Jesus Christ. Let me say it again for you, God did not perform the act of Creation and say, "That's it!" . . . God did not give us Jesus Christ, have Him crucified, have the event take place in the Resurrection Garden, include the chapter on the Mount of the Ascension...and then say, "That's it!" God has done more than that.

Jesus Christ talked about that continuing action, the Holy Comforter who would come -- the Paraclete, the Spirit who would remain for us as God-in-the-Present-Tense. And that's what the Holy Spirit -- God at work in His world now. As Luther explains as he deals with the Third Article of the Creed -- it's God who comes to us as the Holy Spirit who enlightens us and empowers us, who gathers

us together. You and I couldn't possibly think the thoughts of God if God did not enter our hearts and our minds and enable us to respond together. Left by ourselves, we are incapable of fully responding to all that He is, and that's why God is always coming to us -- wooing us, surrounding us, inspiring us.

You see what would happen then if we simply said every time we came together: "In the Name of God" . . . period? But you spell it out! You say the words repeatedly, hopefully that when you say those words you might remind yourself of the totality of God's actions. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord.

Let me begin by reading for you the prayer that was prayed not once, but several times, as the one whom we honor completed her earthly pilgrimage. Again and again these were the words that she heard before she breathed her last. The prayer bears the title:

"Gratitude to God For The
Joy of Being A Christian"

O GOD, I thank Thee for the saving faith in Jesus Christ my Saviour, and for the privilege of being a Christian. Give me a deep and abiding faith, and grant me the grace to show in all my actions and in all my dealings with my fellowmen that Thou art the ruler of my heart and mind and that the joy of salvation is the dominating influence in my life.

KEEP ME from becoming discouraged by the troubles and cares of this life and make me trusting, cheerful and confident. At the same time keep me humble, always, in the knowledge of salvation is from Thee, and that Heaven is Thy gift.

IN GRATITUDE for the salvation which Thou givest, help me to live, to die, in the spirit of the Psalmist -- "I will extol Thee, my God, O King, and I will bless Thy name forever and ever. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise Thy works to another and shall declare Thy mighty acts. I will speak of the glorious honor of the majesty of Thy wondrous works....The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies over all His works... My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord, and I will praise His holy name forever and ever." Amen.

"A VIRTUOUS WOMAN"

...from a prayer book given once to her mother - - a prayer book which became her constant companion . . . and Sis, from this night onward, your guide.

"All over the world today's women are changing, but wherever they are, they are still the keepers of the culture. The world of women is rapidly changing, yet mysteriously there is something stable about it. Not everything about our sophisticated culture is good. But for what is both enriching and demeaning, women seem to be the stabilizers of the culture. Whatever hold it has upon stability or permanence depends upon woman's image of herself."

...had Ethel read these lines she would have underlined them and quietly and confidently she could have said to herself, "How fortunate I am -- I have always known who I am."

One could never think of Ethel as a person having an identity crisis. She was every inch a lady, and every bit a virtuous woman, whose life was touched by the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Four times -- five times -- we traveled together. I have recalled to Winifred on more than one occasion how when we were driving along that delightful English countryside our thoughts came back to this parish, so dear to all of us who were in that car. We talked of certain people, one in particular. And then Ethel characterized that person, using words that I have frequently used to characterize Ethel . . . said Ethel of this person of whom we were speaking, "She seems to be very comfortable with herself."

"He who would climb and soar aloft,
Must ever keep alive,
Within his soul,
The tonic of a wholesome pride."

That allowed her to be very comfortable with herself because she was a fully integrated person, a virtuous woman.

"The world of women is rapidly changing, yet mysteriously there is something stable about it . . . "
...so Ethel could go on and read . . .

"Not everything about our sophisticated culture is good. And yet if there is one human endowment, however belatedly discovered, that gives cohesiveness to our scale of human values in the Western world, it is reverence for the meaning of a person, the force at the heart of our vision of reality . . . "

"A VIRTUOUS WOMAN"

Small wonder that we loved her as we did, because of the high regard that she had for us, as we worked. Having a high regard for herself, and being a life that she knew was touched by God, she had a way of looking for that which is of God in every single one of us.

There are some people from whom I shy away. I can't afford to be in their presence too long -- they bring out the worst side of my nature. Not so Ethel! -- she was appealing to that better side of us as she affirmed the meaning of each of us as a person.

I loved her as I would have loved her had she been my mother. And unashamedly I say to you, on occasion I used to say to her, "Ethel, if God would have had it otherwise and I would have been born all over again and I couldn't have had the mother that I had, I would have been pleased indeed had God placed me under your care."

I loved her as I would have loved a sister, with high and holy regard for the kinship that we could exchange within the family circle. And when that first night that Winifred and I met her, we met her as a sister in Christ, and her shadow has been cast benignly upon us from that very day, and surely to the end of time.

Ethel represents for us - - well, let me put it for you this way . . .

-- through her lifetime the world has moved from ponies
to planes...

-- from carriages to cars....

-- from lanterns to lasers....

-- she was a teenager during World War I....in the
prime of her life in World War II

...and all the changes dramatic and traumatic that have followed! But she remained constant in her role as a virtuous woman.

The one unchanging role of women in every age is to be the keeper of a vision. It is a legacy largely entrusted into their hands. Or let me put it for you this way as another has said:

" . . . Women have a timeless role to play as custodians
of life, the pre-natal life of the unborn, the helplessness of infancy, the psychic fragility of the pre-rational

"A VIRTUOUS WOMAN"

years of a child. All these tenuous holds on life are entrusted to the keeping of a woman. Whatever compassion, tenderness or intuitions of decency supply a dynamic to the work of men as humanizers of society, they most often learn these from the women in their lives. It is not romanticism but humble logic that makes a man admit, however reluctantly, that woman is the keeper of the hearth, the maker of the home, and consequently the custodian of a culture. In a changing world she always manages to hold on to one unchanging role . . . "

You ask me how she became that way? I can only tell you every now and then God touches a person, and every now and then a person responds as other persons do not respond. And God sets them up in front of us, and they become exemplars, and we do well to follow after them.

Let me sum up by sharing this with you regarding Ethel. In a church in Philadelphia there are these words on a tablet: "Whatever is guiltless, candid and benevolent in the human character was conspicuous in her. Amiable in domestic life, fervent in piety, schooled in the Scriptures, eminent in tenderness and charity for others, humble in her views of herself, she was beloved and respected as a person, useful and venerable, as a servant of Jesus Christ."

I hold in my hand a card that she sent to us when she took her 90-year old mother back to their motherland, their native Hungary. Writes Ethel, "The country is still as beautiful as I remembered it. We have been busy delivering messages here and there. Time is fleeting, but I'm loving every moment of it."

...and having arrived safely in Heaven above, there's no question about it -- as she has breathed upon her the very breath of God, she's loving every minute of it.

* * *

"Breathe on Me, Breath of God" - sung by Bryce Redington

(transcribed as recorded)

"BACK TO EDEN - - ?"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Matthew 1: 26

It was a wise teacher indeed who one day, trying to make her point, placed before one of her pupils a single sheet of paper, 8½ x 11 inches in size. Somewhere on that sheet of paper, just where I cannot tell you, there was a tiny blotch, a smudge, perhaps a quarter-of-an-inch in dimension. She said to her pupil, "What do you see?" And as you might suppose, it was the smudge that the youngster saw.

When God created the world it was like a piece of paper, if you please -- immaculate, without blemish. But since then we've seen smudge after smudge. It was not always that way. Hear now the passage of Scripture which serves as the inspiration for all that you're going to hear in the next few minutes. We go back to the very first page in the Bible, a portion of that page reads in this manner:

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. . . . "

Come now, let the question be asked: can we ever go back to Eden, that Paradise? Will the day ever return when we can be as chaste as presumably we once were? Or must we admit that life is only a school where evil is being learned? Does the passage of time only tarnish? Foolish talk. Yet, not so foolish. We need to be sobered by the fact that innocence lost is lost innocence. But this is not the bottom line. Over and above all this there is the precious truth: God does not give up on us. His re-creative hand still reaches for us even though at best, as Luther said, "We give Him rotten wood out of which to carve and a lame horse to ride."

God made man, and God smiled, and He said, "It is good." And when He made man in His own image He gave him the freedom of choice, an exceedingly precious endowment by which God crowns us. Not that we should become automatically good, as though a youngster would simply say to his parents, "Yes, father...yes, mother." No parent wants a child to behave like that. God gave us the freedom of will at the very, very beginning. You know what happens so quickly -- exercising the freedom of choice, man decided to act contrary to what God had in mind. And ever since then -- dare we say it? -- if only to whisper it perhaps....seemingly it's been down-hill ever since.

But God did not intend it that way. God is always saying to us, "You don't have to be bad. You can choose to be good." God is always saying to us: "You don't have to go to Hell." God is always saying to us, "You are meant for Heaven, and you can choose, you can decide."

I am much indebted to a colleague of mine who one time placed on my desk, when she knew how seriously I took counseling ministry, a book that bears the title "Reality Therapy." And the basic theses of that book is introducing to the people the fact that cannot be ignored, that each of us, in the sight of God, is to be seen as a responsible person. God will hold us responsible for what we do with the freedom that He has given us. No man can hide behind the fact that God made it easy for him to be bad just because He gave him the possibility to choose evil. There isn't a single parent anywhere who can't possibly understand what I am trying to say to you.

In the early years when I first became your Pastor there was a deacon of the church, a member of Church Council, who came to me and confessed, "Pastor,

he's a teenage son of mine, and can you possibly understand the anguish of my soul when I see myself now standing -- almost powerless -- as he makes all the mistakes that I made in the days of my youth! And I cannot deny him the freedom of making a fool of himself, if that's what he chooses to be." . . . the harsh reality that remains. But a man doesn't have to make a fool of himself. God endowed us with the capability by which we could choose to be good.

I know it's been said in this particular manner -- the old British limerick which reads in this fashion:

God's plan made a hopeful beginning,
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.
We trust that the story
Will end in God's glory,
But at the present the other side's winning."

With all the strength that I can command this morning, I come to you to tell you this: it doesn't have to be that way. And God again and again and ever so often is coming to us, encouraging us, enlightening us, empowering us -- thanks to the Holy Spirit, by which we can see the right path, and the strength by which to persevere with patience to remain on the right path.

But to every man there comes at some time or other, to every person, always the possibility to stay long on the wrong road. John Oxenham said it wisely when he said: "To every man there openeth a way, and ways, and a way. And the high soul climbs the high way, and the low soul climbs the low. And in between in the misty flats the rest drift to and fro. But to every man there openeth a high way, and a low. And each man decides the way his soul will go."

Some of you heard me say it this past week as I paid tribute to Ethel Anderson. Her name Ethel, you know, means noble. But Ethel did not just become the noble person that she was because she was named Ethel. Ever so often, my good friend, make no mistake about it, the moment of decision was at hand -- she chose to be noble.....she chose to remain noble. Goodness doesn't happen automatically -- nor, I dare say just as quickly, evil doesn't happen automatically. We make the choices. But we don't have to choose evil. There is always the possibility of being good. And to that end God gave us His Holy Word, which is the guidebook for life. It's God's way of showing us how to live!

God gave us Jesus Christ -- not only as an example, but also as a Saviour, that we might be rescued from the road to ruin.....God gives us His Church, in

-- which and through which we are nurtured and strengthened. And every time we come together -- let it be clearly understood -- this divine encounter to all intents and purposes is a re-orientation experience from all the evil by which we have been beset in the past week. In this time of worship God is turning us around, pointing us to Heaven, and saying "This -- this is the way."

I say it again, there are those of us who like to hide behind the fact that God should never have taken the risk that He did and allow us the freedom to choose evil. Joseph Epstein, in an excellent essay, quotes Alexander Solzneytzen(?) who maintained, and I quote now for you: "We must not hide behind fate's petticoats. The most important decisions in our lives, when all is said and done, are the decisions we make for ourselves." Epstein goes on in that valuable essay of his to say to us - -

"We do not choose to be born;

We do not choose our parents;

We do not choose our historical epoch, or the country
of our birth or the immediate circumstances of our
upbringing;

We do not, most of us, choose to die; nor do we choose
the time or conditions of our death . . .

But within all this realm of choicelessness we do choose how we shall live - - - courageously -- or in cowardice; honorably -- or dishonorably; with purpose -- or in drift. We decide what is important, and what is trivial in our life. We decide -- that's what makes us significant, in either what we do, or in what we refuse to do. But no matter how indifferent the universe may be to our choices and our decisions -- these choices and these decisions are ours to make. The fact remains: we decide. We choose. And as we decide and as we choose, so our lives are formed."

I remember reading not so long ago about a very wonderful person, closer to 80 perhaps than 70, still trying to remain active in his day's work. With his wife he had left his office to go for lunch and then was returning. He had been ill, but he still wanted to do his day's work with whatever strength he had, as long as he could. And as they left the lunch-room, he inadvertently stepped in the path of a taxicab. He was hit. He refused to go to the hospital -- he wanted to go to his home.

A day or two after the accident there was a knock on the door. It was the taxi-driver. He brought with him a document, and asked the stricken man to sign it. The taxi-driver's job was in jeopardy; jobs were hard to come by in those

days. He wanted to keep his job for the sake of his wife and children....and he asked the man that he had hit to sign the document exonerating him from all blame. . . .

...he chose to sign that document -- and in choosing proved himself the noble person that he was. Two days later he died. The obituary said, "He died from a serious attack of influenza."

It is given to each of us to choose the kind of person we become.

"Two roads diverged in the yellow wood,
Sorry I could not travel both, and be
one traveler.
Long I stood and looked down one as far as I
could to where it bent in the undergrowth,
And then I took the other, as just as fair and
having perhaps the better claim because
it was grassy and wanted wear.
I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere,
ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the
one less traveled by. And that has made
all the difference."

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE ART OF REBUKING"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

minutes 27:5

I have always been an admirer of the beloved Pope John 23rd, and I presume along with you, if for no other reason, because he clothed with humility the highest honor that Christendom could ever bestow upon any single person.

He reflected upon the fact that one day he would die, and this is what he said: "And when the time comes that I should die, I simply want to be remembered as Guiseppi Rencalli, the man." I sympathize with the person who, when the Pope's death had been announced, could not help but respond in this fashion: "And now the 'Plaster-Paris boys' will take over." - - he realized immediately that once he was dead, they would have the proliferation of statue after statue, each one being so simply plastic...unreal.

By that same token, as I stand at this sacred desk this morning, I am constrained to tell you that we must take great heed lest we allow Jesus Christ, the boy of Nazareth, to be denied his humanity and to make him less than the real person that he was. As I come to the Saint Luke pulpit on this particular Sunday, I am fully aware of the fact that some of you, if only a few, are expecting a so-called Father's Day sermon. I shall do my best not to disappoint you.

Naturally my mind goes back across the years, to a carpenter's shop as well as a home in a Galilean village called Nazareth....a lad -- focus your attention upon Him now -- scarcely a teenager at that, is busy at work. You may, if you wish, believe that he did everything to perfection. You may, if you are so inclined, think that he never for a single second (that's 1/30th of a minute) did anything that warranted rebuke. I shall readily understand if you are quite content in holding dearly the picture of Jesus, a Galilean boy, son of Mary, son of Joseph.

Frankly, if you permit me to say it to you, such a concept of Jesus does very little for me. While I have nothing to offer you by way of Biblical record, it has occurred to me that on occasion Mary may have had to call him more than once when supper was ready.....and if you're inclined to think in this vein as

I am this morning, picture that teenage Christ working hard and diligently in the carpenter shop, dirty with shavings.....and the weather is muggy, his friends are out fishing, swimming, boating -- he has to work . . . or picture him carrying that yoke for the oxen to be delivered to the farmer who lived at the edge of town, and the longer he carried it the heavier it got, and the more, perhaps, he wished he were somewhere else, doing something else. Don't brand me heretical when I talk to you in this fashion. You do Jesus Christ an injustice if you see Him as less than the person that He was. And when perhaps on occasion He wished that He were somewhere else doing something else, and that kind of thing would surface.....do you think for a single minute that Joseph did not take Him to task?

You see, there's a passage of Scripture that spells out such thinking for us, giving us justification to think in this manner. For what else will you do with that passage in the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

". . . and Jesus went down to Nazareth and
was subject unto them . . . "

If that means anything at all, surely it allows for parental guidance and discipline, for we have reason to believe that in this Joseph fully shared.....since in those days there was no question whatsoever regarding the father of the household as the disciplinarian and as the authority figure. So on this day I'd like you to think in terms of the father as one who also serves because he rebukes.

You are wrong if you think that the father is first to be seen as the provider. There was a day when that was true. What with so many wives working these days, for whatever reason, in many instances the dependency of the family is upon a joint income. And what with the ever-increasing so-called liberation of the female species, there could be a resistance among some of you to the concept that one person, and a man at that, should be recognized as the head of the house -- the disciplinarian, the authority figure. The fact does remain that in the day of Jesus the father was both seen as provider and disciplinarian.

I am hoping to make this sermon as relevant as possible for you, and I presume there's little need on my part then to reinforce the idea that the family should be given adequate provision. Thanks to the help given by the working wife, the average family, generally speaking, is better provided for financially today than at any other time in our history. But as far as discipline is concernedthat is another story.

There was a day, long since past, when a child would be told - - "Now you just wait until your father comes home!" - - some of you will get the image quickly..

...it was Dad who had the paddle

...it was Dad who went out and cut the switch

...it was Dad who reached for the razor strop,

if not his belt

...it was Dad who gave the lecture in the woodshed, with

more than words....

What I'm really driving at is to focus upon a lost art -- the art of rebuking, the art of disciplining.

Can you remember when you last, out of sheer love, deliberately rebuked and disciplined and chastised a child of yours? The father of more than a generation ago was expected to excell in the art of rebuking. And it was absolutely as direct as it could be. There was no mistaking it.

Those of us who are caught up in counseling today have been advised by some people:

-- never to speak directly

-- never to forbid

-- never to persuade

-- never to order . . . you shy away from a direct confrontation,

you specialize in the art of indirect counseling....

And would you believe it, that there are those who say the pastors, when they preach at the sacred desk - - "Whatever you do, don't take your congregation to task. They will resent being ordered, forbidden, being given advice, or feeling the pressure persuasion."

And yet despite the current style of camaraderie, and the in status of indirect counseling, I come to you this morning to reckon with an uncomfortable plain truth from the Old Testament. The text for all that you're hearing during this sermon this morning is the 5th verse of the 27th chapter of the Book of Proverbs. Listen to it carefully, for this is the way James Moffatt translated it for us magnificently:

"Better a frank word of reproof than the love
that will not speak."

I am willing to believe that there is down deep inside most of us a lingering hunger to be put in our place. If we don't appreciate it at the present moment, then years later we will recognize the benefit of discipline, and thank God for

those who told it as it was and cut us down to size.

Occasionally I reach for a book that I've loaned, only to discover anew that it still hasn't come back to my shelf. I'm thinking particularly of John Steinbeck's delightful little book "Travels With Charlie." Some of you have read it. You may remember, quite a while ago the celebrated author took a tour of the country leisurely, taking as his only companion his dog Charlie.

On one particular Sunday when he was in New England, he decided to go to church. He was not a conventional church-goer, as you know. It was quite an experience -- it may have been one of those 'Hell-fire-brimstone-and-damnation' sermons. At any rate, this is what he had to say regarding it. Let me read his exact words for you:

"For some years now God has been the pal to us . . . "
(you can thank him for putting it that way. How it ever crept into our theology and into our practice of the faith I don't know. But any number of people have dragged God down to our level and made Him a kind of buddy-buddy sort of thing, who would never so much as say an unkind word to us -- we were that buddy-buddy)...well, these are Steinbeck's words for it . . .

"For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing togetherness, and that causes the same emptiness a father does playing softball with his son. But this Vermont God . . . "

...as he thought of the preacher who laid it on in that New England church....

" . . . but this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble . . . "

(and I'll give it to you the way Steinbrook said it)

" . . to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective: whereas for me they had been small and mean and nasty, and at best forgotten -- this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity!"

....as though he put them right out there in front of him, you see. Steinbeck goes on to say,

"I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension, there was some pride left."

And then he reflected:

"I wasn't a naughty child, but in the eyes of that preacher I was a first-rate sinner....and I was given to understand that I was going to catch it!"

You read the Scriptures, my friend, and you cannot escape this concept of God. As father-God He rebukes. He is always taking us to task, and it may surprise you a bit if you read the New Testament as though you've never read it before, to discover how often Jesus Christ is rebuking people, and taking them to task, and calling it exactly as it was!

Lest I be misunderstood, and lest you exploit what I am saying, rebuking does not always have to be as condemnation. Be very careful about that. And I'm not so sure that rebuke must always be the first word that we speak to a person....nor ought it to be the last word that we speak. But on occasion it is a word that must be spoken. From the Christian perspective it is always to be seen as a measure of concern that we have for a person....and that there's no willingness on our part to ignore the evil as we see it.

There was a man who went to Florida, Daytona Beach, at the time some years back when there was this avalanche of students from the north. The Easter recess had given them a chance to get away from home, the restraints from home, and the freedom of being away from a college campus and the classroom and the exams. They were allowing it to hang loose and to let it all hang out in front just as it was . . .

There was a man who encountered such a chap one morning walking on the beach, wearing a sweat-shirt. The man had been around -- he knew exactly what was on that sweat-shirt. But he walked up to the fellow and he said,

"Ah - you're from the University of Virginia!"

And the chap says, "No . . ."

And the man says,

"Well, why don't you drop your hands and let me read for myself what's written on the front of your sweat-shirt!"

The young man obliged, somewhat sheepishly, and this is what the man was able to read on that fellow's sweat-shirt:

HELP STAMP OUT VIRGINITY

....the boy by now was ashamed. His conscience, thank God, was being aroused. The man who had encountered him continued to walk ahead of him. But the boy for some reason -- let's say it's his conscience now -- forces him to walk after the man and to engage him in further conversation. With whatever

streak of decency there is in the fellow, he says to the man, "I suppose you'd like me to throw this sweat-shirt away?"

And the man replied:

"No, I'd like you to take it home....have it dry-cleaned. Then I'd like you to put it in a plastic container . . . In looking at you, young man, I think your future is rich in promise. You're a very likely chap. And chances are that after college you're going to get married, and you'll have some children....

....when your daughter is 16, I want you to go up to the closet, take out that sweat-shirt, and let her wear it on her first date."

The student could only think to respond:

"If my father had talked to me like that, I would never have worn it in the first place."

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"SEARCHER OF THE HUMAN HEART"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 2:23-25

The sermon this morning bears the title: "God - The Searcher of The Human Heart" and the text, the closing verses of the second chapter of the Gospel according to John:

" . . . Now when he was in Jerusalem at the pass-over,
in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they
saw the miracles which he did.

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because
he knew all men,

And needed not that any should testify of man; for
he knew what was in man . . . "

Some four decades have passed since those student days of blessed memory, those years that I spent on the campus of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg. I stayed in what we affectionately referred to as "Old Dorm." It was a modest, brick, three-storey structure, which I am told during the War Between the States served as a hospital of sorts. My room was #36 on the second floor - - all three floors were utilized as housing for what was almost the entire student body.

My desk was near the window. And one night in March as I sat there, I heard what was not an unusual noise in the room above me, to be followed shortly by a sudden downward draft, so it seemed to me, outside my window. Not long after that the entire student body was stunned by what was made known to us: a school-mate of ours who lived in that room above me, had braced himself on the radiator by the window, opened the window and then plunged to his death, which came immediately as his body with driven force came upon the frozen ground.

I think I should tell you, he was the son of a parsonage.

I think you should know that he was only months away from graduation, and then would follow being ordained as a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I think I should tell you that rumors had it that he had been jilted by the woman that he loved.

We gathered together, that student body of ours, in the Chapel of the Seminary. That grand old man, our much-beloved President, Dr. John Aberly, conducted the service. He took as his text a passage of Scripture that continues to grip my soul, and I would hope would have its equal grip upon me to the very day that I die. It came from a passage of Scripture which has still endeared itself to me, one of my favorite Psalms -- #139.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my thoughts . . . "

It wasn't that he wanted us to be guilt-stricken....it wasn't that he especially wanted us to examine ourselves as to whether or not we would have self-destructive tendencies. But it was the intention of the preacher to have us examine ourselves if perchance we could discover the kind of person that we happened to have been.

How well do you really know yourself? How well do you know other people. Honestly now, a good question. Is it possible for a person to know himself fully and completely? Is it not true that some of us who have lived a bit longer can also freely admit that to a degree we remain a mystery to ourselves -- never quite understanding why we do what we have done, or why we may think what we think -- not only regarding ourselves, but other people as well, and the world in which we happen to be placed, the arena in which we're meant to live the days of our years . . .

"Search me, O God -- and know my heart;
Try me, and know my thoughts . . . "

Does any person on his own ever really know who he is? Isn't this one reason why some people are perfectly willing, and constrained to do so, to spend perfectly good money to go to someone who sits there alongside of the proverbial couch, as wittingly or unwittingly they allow the pieces to come out -- hoping of course that that person seated alongside of them might put all the pieces of the puzzle together and say, "Now this is it" by the time the final session in the series has arrived.....or perchance to take the palette and choose the colors which the person himself, in his own way, has indicated.....and then the counsellor says, "This is the portrait -- this is you."

Again I ask the question, is it possible for any one of us ever to fully understand himself? Does it lie within me to know who I really am? How fortunate we are as Christians -- we have a God who sees straight through us, who knows us, who knows all about us, from whose view we cannot escape.

You read again that Psalm 139 -- it's a magnificent thing....

- it talks about the omnipotence of God -- He's all-powerful, there isn't anything that He can't do....
- it talks about the omnipresence of God -- there's no place where He can't be found....
- it talks about the omniscience of God -- He's the all-seeing God, the all-knowing God....

Have you ever thought of God like that? And how fortunate we are that God is one who knows us? After all, who could know us better than the one who made us? After all, who should know us better than the one who is our Heavenly Father?

....after all, who should know us better than the one who gave us His Son, to suffer, in order to redeem us.

....that's how well He knows us!

I'm not certain that I have any full idea as to what concept you have about Jesus Christ when He was here on earth. What is the first picture that comes to your mind when you think of Jesus Christ in His ministry among us? Some of you think perhaps He went around saying nice things to people and giving them a gracious pat on the shoulder and saying, "There, there - you're all right" -- I'm not so sure He did too much of that -- a reasonable amount, but never an inordinate amount.

And you are wrong if you think He spent all of His time preaching sermons, necessary as they were. And you fall short of the mark if you think every time He was with His disciples they had a prayer session -- important as that was! And you'd better alter your thinking if you think He spent all of His time snapping His fingers and performing miracles . . . important as that ministry was!

As you read the New Testament as though you had never read it before, and you may get a surprise, hopefully. Every now and then He just sat down with one person at a time, and He'd have an encounter with the person individually, and looked that person straight in the eye, and called it exactly as He saw it, and gave that person to understand the kind of person that he happened to have been. You can read all about it for yourself -- it's there -- again and again and ever so often, looking this person, that person, straight in the eye.....and I have reason to think every now and then one of them might have responded and said, "Why do you look at me like that?" -- knowing full well that everything was being laid out in front, nothing was being concealed.

We have our moments, you know, when we think we can hide things from other people. We have our moments when we think we can hide things from ourselves, and

refuse to call by name what we do know is there. But not so with God, from whom no secrets are hid!

I have good news for you, in case you haven't thought of it: you can afford to let Him look you straight in the eye, for when He comes to probe, and to search, He is the one you can trust with what He finds, He is the one who can offer the corrective. He is the one who can offer the cleansing, redeeming touch - -

"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my thoughts. And if
there be any evil way in me,
You lead me in the right way . . . "

That's the way the Scriptures read, that's the way they are to be understood. You can afford to trust Him, to tell it as it is, because He can provide the corrective and the cleansing touch.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti has a drawing, I am told, which interprets for us that encounter of Mary of Magdala, Mary, the woman of the streets, who when she was first encountered by Jesus Christ.....Christ is standing on a balcony, looking down on the street below....Mary, the fallen woman, the woman of the streets, is tripping along gaily and happily, with never so much a thought of God, when all of a sudden she turns and looks up - - and there He is. And their eyes meet. And she can never again be the same . . . He saw her as she was. He gave her to understand when they met that He also saw her as she could become!

Whenever you allow yourself an image of God, think in terms of the eyes of God that are focused upon you. And the Christian has a right to believe that those eyes are focused upon him as though they were not focused upon anyone else. It's as personal as all that!

When Napoleon Bonaparte had learned that some of his lieutenants were not as trustworthy as he believed them to be, he realized that he was in duty bound to find out those whom he could trust and those he could not trust. He devised, I am told, a very clever bit of strategy . . .

(but now, as I share it with you, it's so understandable
in the light of the sermon that I am preaching)

The word went out that all of his lieutenants were to gather in a particular place on a certain day at a certain hour. Napoleon, the little man, stations himself in a large room, without any furniture whatsoever. There were only two doors, an entrance, and an exit. And only one person was to be ushered in at a time, only one person was to be in that room with Napoleon Bonaparte at the same time. He positioned himself the farthest away from the entrance door, and then as the door

was opened the lieutenant came in and walked across the floor...

....and as he did so, Bonaparte put out his hand, and he shook

the hand of the lieutenant as he looked him straight in the eye.

When the last person had come and gone, Bonaparte had a pretty good idea of those whom he could trust, and those who were not loyal.

There is no substitute for looking straight in the eye. The youngster grew up to be a man, and as he remembered the days of his youth he recalled for the benefit of his own children how he dreaded at certain times his dad coming home from work, for his dad had an uncanny sense - - when he came home he could look the youngster straight in the eye and knew exactly as he looked in the eye of the kid what he had been up to that day that he shouldn't have been up to!

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. And if there be any evil in me, lead me in the way everlasting."

God is the great heart-searcher. He can read what's there. And He can read between the lines. And He makes sense of what He reads. And He always provides us the prescription: what we ought to do next.

I don't know how you picture Judgment, but Studdart-Kennedy was a great British preacher -- creative, ingenious, innovative. He has a cockney soldier dreaming how it is going to be in the time of Judgment. Let me read it for you, just as he wrote it, language and all . . .

"I seem to stand alone, beside a solemn kind of sea,
Its waves, they got inside and touched my memory;
And day by day, and year by year,
My life came back to me.

All eyes was in His eye, all eyes,
My wife's and a million more;
And once I thought as those two eyes
Were the eyes of a London whore.

And they was sad -- my God, how sad,
With tears that seemed to shine;
And quivering bright with the speech of light,
They said, "Her soul was Mine."

And then at last He said one word --
He said just one word: "Well?"
And then I said, in a funny voice,
"Please, Sir, can I go to Hell?"

And He stood there and He looked at me,
And He kind of seemed to glow,
'Til He shone like the sun above my head,
And then He answered, "No. You can't.

" That Hell is for the blind,
And not for those who see;
You know that you have earned it, lad,
So you must follow Me.

Follow Me on by the paths of pain,
Seeing what you have seen,
Until at least you can build the is
With the bricks of the might-have-been"

That's what He said, as I'm alive,
And that there dream was true!
But what He meant I don't quite know,
Though I know what I have to do.

I've got to follow what I've seen
Until this old carcass dies;
For I daren't face, in the land of Grace
The sorrow of those eyes.

There ain't no Throne, there ain't no Books --
It's Him you've got to see;
It's Him, just Him, that's the Judge of
blokes like you and me.

And, boys, I'd sooner frizzle up
In the flames of burning Hell,
Than stand and look into His face
And hear His voice say: "Well?"

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

PRAYER FOR PEACE....offered by Pastor Raymond Shaheen
June 27, 1982

As we share this worship experience together, this is the time particularly devoted to praying. As I come to this moment in the service...

....the innocent are being killed, those who have found some measure of shelter now are being driven into homelessness. The carnage is not being fully revealed to us. We hear only a limited amount of reports.

I am not insensitive to the fact that the Jews have suffered as they have. With my own eyes I saw the documented films presented at the War Crimes Trials at Nuremberg. I walked around the ghetto in Warsaw, where millions of Jews were exterminated. I know the longing in their hearts for a homeland. I am not insensitive to that.

But I also know that the Arabs live there too. And I remember being there not long after the partition, and seeing how uprooted from their lands, they were forced to live on less than two dollars a month -- twenty-three dollars a year, provided by the United Nations Relief.

I've lived long enough to know how these Palestinians have been spawned in hate. I'm a student enough of history to know that when you try to resolve one problem you may create a greater problem. I am simply saying this to you, that I hope in your prayers you may pray that the Palestinian problem will be dealt with forthrightly. What the answer may be, I am not in a position to give to you. But there will be no peace in our time as long as we ignore the right of both peoples to live in that section of the world. Let us pray

IT IS SO FAR AWAY, O GOD,
We can isolate ourselves from it so easily.
Who do we know who is dying there?
Who do we know whose blood is flowing freely?
We pray for them, particularly the innocent;
for the leaders, O God, who may be in a
position to chart the course of the future,
grant them the wisdom not of man's making,
and enable us to believe that we're all
held in the hollow of Your hand, that we
all belong to You.

O GOD, Hear our prayer for those who minister
to their needs. Hear our prayer for peace,
and those who work for the things that make
for peace.

OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN

"AN UNFINISHED AGENDA"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Hebrew 11:13

Just where it came on the agenda at that meeting of Church Council a few months ago, I don't remember, but I do recall when Ann Hesse Nuss, the capable Chairman of the Committee on Staff, had completed her report, she said, "Now if it please Council, I'd like to make another motion." The motion that she made was this: That the Senior Pastor of this congregation be authorized to prepare a paper in which he would outline for the benefit of Pastor David, who'd assume responsibility for parish administration, and for the benefit of the congregation itself, the kind of thing that the Senior Pastor would like to have seen on the agenda if he were to have continued in that role.

The intent of the motion, of course, was not to lock anybody in to what somebody else might think ought to be done, but to provide, however, a continuum of sorts of what could be considered.

It was a traumatic experience. A multi-page document was prepared. It was eventually shared with the Church Council and a joint session of the Committee on Staff, subsequently with members of the staff themselves -- traumatic in this sense, that as I reflected on more than a quarter-of-a-century of ministry among you, and as I thought in terms of things yet to be done, I was absolutely amazed at the number of things that remained on my unfinished agenda -- the things that I myself would like to see realized if I were to continue as the chief administrator of this parish...a traumatic experience to say the least.

Having said that, let me tell you how sobering it was for me to realize that when our Blessed Lord was here on earth, He had an agenda, too. and some of us have stood in the very place where presumably He came and announced His intention. He was a carpenter's-son-turned-preacher, the penniless wanderer who went from place to place -- preaching, healing, performing miracles, making disciples. He had been at it only a comparatively short period of time when He returned to His home town. They had heard a great deal about what He had been up to. It was no surprise that the congregation filled the synagogue to capacity when He returned.

They did Him honor, of course, and they said, "Why don't you read the Lessons for us" -- a mark of distinction that they would give to this person or to that person, only a limited number of people could enjoy that privilege.

He took the holy writings, and read from an Old Testament prophet by the name of Isaiah....and when He read, He read that passage of Scripture that declared how the work of God ought to be done here on earth --

- the oppressed ought to be ministered to
- the weak ought to be made strong
- the captives ought to be given some chance to
be made free from their bondage....
- the Good News of God should be told to everybody.

When He finished reading, He did a very surprising thing. He said, "Today I tell you this Scripture is going to come true, and it's going to come true through me, because this is what I intend to do. This is how I will direct my energies as long as I will live, doing this kind of thing."

I have been to Nazareth. I wanted to go there not only because it was the place where He was brought up as a youngster, and where He worked in the carpenter shop and where He began His ministry....but because I wanted to be in that very place where He proclaimed what was on His agenda. I am in duty bound to tell you that He only had three years to do His thing, and I say that respectfully -- only three years. He died, what we might say, before His time. There was so much yet that He wanted to do!

Oh, I know very well every Good Friday preacher we have had who has stood at this sacred desk and echoed for us the words from the Cross as dealt with that one word in particular, "It is finished". But I can't possibly allow myself to believe that Jesus Christ was saying to everybody: "Everything that I set out to do is now done" . . . that wasn't true at all.

- there were still many blind people who needed
to have vision.....
- there were still many lame people who couldn't
walk.....

And how much of His energy was spent doing that sort of thing?

-- and there were so many unredeemed souls who had yet to be
rouched by the love of God, and to become converts to the Kingdom. His work was
not finished.

And in company with some of you I stood on the Mount of the Ascension and I had deep thoughts there too -- how Jesus Christ turned to a small company of people, as much as to say to them, "I have an unfinished agenda"....and by the way, that's the title for this sermon: "An Unfinished Agenda." And to all intents and purposes Jesus Christ is saying to His friends, "My work isn't completed. There's so much yet that I would like to do -- now you go, and you preach and you teach and you baptize and you make disciples -- you go on doing everything that I wish that I could do if I were to remain among you."

It's a very sobering thought, I tell you, to realize that here is one at 33 years of age who, as we might say, if we analyze His life, was cut down in His prime, died before His time -- so much yet to be done.

Death does not always come to everyone as it came to my dear father....at some 90 years of age he was just worn out -- he died of old age. A week or so before he died -- "Raymond, I'm just tired" . . . I can understand that kind of death. But one of my younger brothers, in his early 50's, in the prime of life -- with so much zest for living -- to be stricken with lung cancer and a brain tumor, and to go in four months -- that's something entirely different! . . . to die with an unfinished agenda -- it happens again and again and again. It happens ever so often.

When I traveled to the Dead Sea, I looked to the Plains of Moab and my heart went out to that man Moses -- hand-picked by God to be the leader of the Children of Israel....and how much flack he took from them just because he was their leader, just because he was in duty bound to do what God told him to do.....and how obstinate they were, but he gave himself to them, never failing to goad them on in the right direction, and always pointing that way.. . . and then when he got there, to have God say, "Moses, this is it! You don't go any farther -- this is where you stop! You won't set foot on the Promised Land. It happens ever so often, to die with an unfinished agenda.

But it's not all that bad, my friend. I wouldn't give very much for a person who felt, all other things being equal, that he'd accomplished everything he set out to accomplish. You have no idea how much I spend sometimes with a concern for people who are bored, because they allow themselves foolishly to think that they've arrived -- they've done everything they set out to do -- they have no goals beyond the present moment, nothing to challenge them as far as tomorrow is concerned. And I pray earnestly that as God gives me any measure of strength, that I'll always be

thinking in terms of another chapter yet to be written! -- to be gripped by dreams yet to be fulfilled. He's the person who really lives who is always thinking in terms of another chapter yet to be written.

I beg you with all the strength that my soul can command to examine your goals and to see whether or not you are dealing with goals that are too easily attainable.....they are paltry and puny.

If I were inclined to do it sometime, and if I had the time and the energy, I could analyze our civilization by the kind of advertising to which we're exposed. The little time that I've spent reading and listening to advertisements provides me a measure of nausea. It could well be that people in years yet to come will look back upon us, as they examine our advertising, and say we were a people who concerned themselves primarily with the 3 D's: detergents deodorants, and dog food. Important as any of these may be in itself, it's not the ultimate of our civilization.

There's a text for this sermon, the 13th verse of the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

"They all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar."

The person who wrote those words wrote them in times very much as the times that claim our energies and concern. And every single one of these grand and glorious persons died, if you please, with an unfinished agenda. I'm grateful for the fact -- I think I've come to deal with it now -- there will be much work to be done when I have finished my course. I will never be able to do all that I had hoped to do. And that in itself is not bad!

- none of us will live long enough to see poverty completely eradicated from the face of the earth....
- none of us will live long enough to see every person claimed for Jesus Christ

No matter how noble the dream, it will not happen in your day, it will not happen in your children's day. But does that give cause for despair? Of course not. It simply means that while you and I live we should devote our energy toward the realization of the dream -- trying to help make it become a reality for somebody else! That's the acid test of life -- the justification for your existence and my existence is when we devote our energies toward the good from which others may benefit.

A man said it in Church Council on Tuesday evening. It was a very salutary experience -- you ought to know this. We got finished with our agenda well before our 10:00 o'clock adjournment time. And then I was constrained, and I said to the Council, "Why don't we do something we've never done before -- and this is very, very important. We'll take time to do it: Each of you in turn share with the rest of us how you witness for Jesus Christ in your daily life."

....it's one thing to think in terms of a Council member as he witnesses for Christ through Saint Luke congregation. But this is not the only place where a person is intended to witness for Christ. -- where he labors -- how about that?

And then each person in turn gave a testimony. You would have been pleased. And I remember one person in particular who said that he tried to plant shade trees, under whose shade he himself might never sit.

So you and I, you see, are meant to give our energies toward those things that benefit other people eventually -- even though we in our day may never realize for ourselves the dream come true.

"I would not have my life be one of bliss;
Untouched by heartache, agony, despair,
A pale anemic thing.

My nightly prayer is that with each new day
I shall not miss high venturings, nor
undeserve the hiss of envious human moles.

Who never dare to touch off rockets in their souls,
And flare above their deepening grooves.
O grant me this, that I shall scale life's peaks,
Explore its glooms, no mountain's ecstasy;
Deep valleyed pains.

Then, when my last red sands by time are sieved,
And life has struck my sinews from her looms,
I shall have earned three words o'er my remains:

Beside Was Born and Died -- between: He Lived --
Not for today alone, but for tomorrow as well."

What do you still want to accomplish in life, my friend? How significant are your goals? To what end are you directing your energies? These really are the questions that matter most. For you remember what I told you on occasion -- that awesome understanding of Judgment -- -- having God stand there when we finish our course, and have Him look us straight in the eye and say, "Well -- What did you make of it? What in Heaven's name did you do on earth today?"

On May 19, 1780, in Hartford, Connecticut, at noon, a terrifying storm arose. The sky became as dark as the night. People became frightened. There were those who honestly believed it was the Judgment Day, and that the world was coming to an end. Some persons in panic ran here and they ran there, and would you believe it, it's a matter of record that some even knelt in prayer in the streets.

The Connecticut House of Representatives was in session. Colonel Davenport was the Speaker. He calmly stood up in the midst of the fever of the chaos and confusion and said, "I do not know whether this is the end of the world or not. If not, it will be a waste of time for us to quit our tasks. If it is Judgment Day, I for one want to be found doing my tasks. Therefore, let the candles be brought, and let us be found continuing in our tasks."

Don't be frightened, my friend. You may die with an unfinished agenda. And it could be the acid test of your life as you leave behind you the kind of thing toward which you were still looking. And that can be a happy thought!

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THERE'S ALWAYS EGYPT"
(Jeremiah 42:13-14)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Now let me begin this sermon by telling you that there are certain among you who could find it beneficial. ; ppefully every time the preacher goes to the sacred desk there may be this person or that person who might be able to say -- 'That was the sermon that I needed very, very much.'

I am fully aware, after preaching these many years, that not all people draw the same measure of benefit from each sermon. But every now and then it's this sermon or that sermon, to use the good Quaker expression, that could 'speak to the deep' need of your soul.'

Now who is the person who might draw such benefit from today's sermon?

- if you are a person who's had it with what you have to take at home -- if you've had it as far as your mate is concerned, this sermon could be for you.....
- if you've had it as far as your children are concerned, if you find rebellious teenagers on your hand, and you're fed up with it, this sermon could be for you.....
- if where you work you find yourself in an intolerable situation, and you dread every morning that you have to return to the place where you labor....and if when you come home at night you say to your mate -- "I'm fed up with it" -- this sermon could be for you.....
- if you live in a changing neighborhood, and if where you live the situation has deplored immensely, not nearly as nice as it once was, and you have your moments when you'd much rather be somewhere else -- this sermon could be for you.

It has a title, of course it has a title, and the title, interestingly enough, which will make sense to you as the sermon unfolds, is simply this: "There Is

Always Egypt"...and the text, from the book of Jeremiah, the 42nd chapter, the 13th and 14th verses:

" . . . but if you say, we will not remain in this land, disobeying the voice of the Lord your God, and saying, No, we shall go to the land of Egypt, and we shall not see war, and we will not hear the sound of the trumpet, and we will not be hungry for bread. We will dwell there "

As I am fully aware of what is happening in the Middle East these days, a section of the world that's in perpetual turmoil, I've rediscovered the value of the Old Testament. And what you are about to hear this morning as the sermon unfolds is the kind of thing that's been going on in that part of the world decade after decade after decade.

Now, let me bring to your attention the names of five people. It may be a bit much for you to remember them, but relax, let me remember them for you, and I'll bring them back to your attention occasionally in the course of the sermon:

Name #1 - Zedekiah

Name #2 - Jeremiah

Name #3 - Cedaliah

Name #4 - Ishmael

Name #5 - Johanan

Now a word about each of them.

Zedekiah, he was the king. He had to deal with the threat of the Chaldeans. He got mixed advice. Those who surrounded him said, "Resist them! -- fight to the bitter end! don't you dare give in! -- sacrifice everything that you have . . ." ...their threat was that formidable that that was the advice that he got from the retinue who were very close to him....

...but he got this advice from the preacher-man, Jeremiah was his name. Jeremiah said, "Surrender! -- don't sacrifice your people needlessly! Don't allow Jerusalem to be sacked!"

...but Zedekiah did not, as is true for any number of people, take the advice of the preacher.

Jeremiah was disappointed. He saw his city in flames, he saw his people massacred. Some were taken bondage to Babylon, but then there was a remnant

that was allowed to stay on the land, to till the fields, to care for the vines. And over that remnant they placed Man #3: his name, Gedaliah. He was trusted by the Chaldeans, and the Chaldeans said, "You be our governor now, you be our man-on-the-scene, you represent us." He tried to do a decent job, honestly he did, and he gathered together the remnant, and he told them that he would do his best to represent them to the Chaldeans, that he'd do everything in his power, I dare say, to see that they would not suffer at the hand of the occupying power. He was nobly intentioned.

But then there was a fellow by the name of Ishmael, who did not feel kindly toward this man -- for a number of different reasons, I suppose -- maybe because he was chosen and not he, and what do you suppose he did? He plotted to kill him, the representative of his own people, who represented the Chaldeans.

Now Johanan -- that's that other man -- he gets wind of this. And being conscience-stricken, and being a realist at the same time, he goes to Gedaliah, and tells him what's up -- "Man, you're going to be killed -- and this is the man who is going to do it -- take my word for it!"....and then for some reason that I can't explain, the governor invites this man who is plotting his death to be his supper guest. And then as they break bread together, the rascal, he gives the sign to his cohorts, and they kill the representative of the Chaldeans right on the spot -- Ishmael had perpetuated that, and got away with it, and also killed some of the governor's advisors.

As though this were not enough, and I can't explain this to you except maybe living in that kind of mentality and in that kind of environment, it does something to a person -- he did something equally unreasonable. There were eighty pilgrims who came that way, and he slaughtered every single one of them and dumped their bodies into the cistern that Asa had built for his people.

Now this is more than Johanan can take. He gets a small group together, and they go after Ishmael. Ishmael escapes. Johanan doesn't get his man...And the governor didn't listen to him when he told him what was up. Now he's frightened. "Think what's going to happen when the Chaldeans learn what we've done -- we've killed their man...and all these other things beside have happened -- think what they're going to do to us!" . . . and so, I can picture him saying -- "I've had it! -- I'm fed up with all of this. It doesn't pay to stick it out here any longer!" The only thing that seems reasonable to him at that time was to run

away. And who among you doesn't understand that mentality? -- Run . . . run . . . run . . . "He who fights and runs away, will live to fight another day . . ." More than one person subscribes to that philosophy - - let me run.

But Johanan reasons within himself, wouldn't it be wonderful if what I propose to do now would have the blessing of God! So he goes back to the preacher-man: "Jeremiah, we've made up our minds this is what we're going to do. Now you talk it over with the Lord, and hopefully of course the Lord will see it our way . . . " Now who among you doesn't understand that, too?

- - we're always telling the Lord how we want

Him to answer our prayers....

- - we're always writing the Lord's ticket....

- - we're always giving the Lord the answer that we want....

So Johanan tells Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is a smart boy. Jeremiah needs time to think, so he says, "Give me ten days ." - - not that it takes the Lord ten days to make up His mind, but there was a purpose to be served. So after ten days Jeremiah comes back, and he says, "The Lord says No. You're my remnant -- you stay here."

...but that isn't all that Jeremiah said. He gave them to understand that even though they're fed up with it, and even though they find the situation intolerable -- even though they're bent on running, Jeremiah as the mouth-piece of the Lord says, "You think it's going to be different in Egypt? -- you say to yourself fancifully, 'there's always Egypt' - - well, let me tell you one thing: it's not going to be any different in Egypt! Everything you want to run away from, you're going to find coming to pass in Egypt eventually."

....and that's exactly what happened!

Now, my friend, every sermon based upon Scriptural truths has value as it can be made relevant to your situation. I have lived long enough to know that there may be times when you extricate yourself from where you are. I believe this to be true. There are times when perhaps there is no hope in the situation in which you may find yourself. And maybe the divine directive will be "Move on - - go somewhere else." But in this case, and in most cases, maybe one can say, "Disillusion yourself of the notion that things will be brighter and better

just because you move on."

One can say that, you see, quite earnestly because so frequently some of the problems that you have to face are problems of your own making! You daren't forget that, you see. You can't always blame the forces and the factors that are beyond you. When I first became Pastor of this congregation I sought out the advice and counsel of the man who was then President of the Synod, Dr. J. Frank Fife. And we were talking in general terms. And he said to me, "I think, generally speaking, most pastors have problems, no matter where they may go. But that doesn't mean that every pastor is conquered by his problems and succumbs to them." But what impressed me most in what Dr. Fife had to say to me was that some problems the people create for the pastor, and then there's the kind of a pastor that no matter where he goes, he creates problems.

I once knew a friend of mine who had tremendous ability, but no matter what assignment he had, there was always this other person who was his thorn in the flesh, and he was always trying to get away from this other person. The last time I heard of him he left New York -- he went all the way to Texas, as far away from New York as he could get and still be in the continental United States, believing that he could get away from that kind of a person. But no matter where he would go, he'd always have that kind of a person to irritate him and annoy him because of his personality.

You have no assurance, my friend, that just because you run away you won't take yourself with you! No matter where you may go, you take yourself! Who put it, and put it so well: "He who would bring back the wealth of the Indies with him must first carry the wealth of the Indies in his heart."

What advice can I give you? Realistically appraise your situation. See how much you may be contributing to the problem -- you may be far more part of the problem than you are of the answer.

And then secondly, try realistically to adjust and to accept the situation that you find on your hands, and then respond to it creatively by the grace of God and by the strength of 6d.

Now you may ask me, what did 6d have in mind for the remnant, since He wanted them to stay there? I can't tell you that precisely. I only know that

God works through a remnant. and I only know that God, when He works through a remnant, expects them to do what needs to be done where they happen to be.

Now because strain and tention and stress can exact its price from us, sometimes we think we would be better off if we were somewhere else . . .

- "If I were only married to some other woman . . ." or the woman can say -- "If I were only married to some other man . . ."
- or -- "If only our kids could be like somebody else's kids . . ."
- or -- "If only my job could be the job that somebody else has . . ."
- "If only . . ."
- "If only . . ."
- "If only I could run -- how much greener the grass could be elsewhere, how much brighter, how much better the situation . . ."

But what does God expect from us while we're here on earth? Do the best with what we have, wherever we may happen to be. Sometimes He may allow us to go somewhere else. But to develop character we may have to see it through where we are. Anybody can run away.

It frightens me, the weakness of the generation of which some of us have surveyed -- this cop-out generation -- always the tendency to drop it and to run -- to another place, to another person, to another position -- I don't know of any generation where this has been more in vogue, at least in my lifetime -- the tendency to run, to think in terms: ". . . always there's Egypt!"

I don't mind telling you this, because I think you need to hear this kind of testimony, maybe I told it to you before. When we buried my father, I walked away from the grave with my mother. My father had come to this country as an immigrant, he came at a time when it was tough to be an immigrant. America just didn't want these people from overseas. He had to fight every day for every inch of ground that he gained, and that made him a very stubborn, a very persistent person. And he wasn't always easy to get along with. He was a very good person, but a very stubborn person.

And they went through two depressions, and they had six of us kids, and times were rough. But they stuck it out -- they were married for over sixty yearswhich made me appreciate more than ever what she said to me when I told her,

"Thank you for what you did for Dad and for us." . . . her big brown eyes spoke eloquently -- she looked into my face and said, "But Raymond, it wasn't always easy." But you see, we want it to be easy, and we always want the situation to be nice.

He revealed so much when as a college graduate he was asked, "What do you want out of life?" . . . "Well, I'd like a nice wife...I'd like a nice job...and I'd like to live in a nice situation" -- always wanting it to be nice. But life isn't always going to be nice, and sometimes the ultimate test lies in the willingness to stay where you are and do what needs to be done there.

I am smiling broadly now, because -- I may have told you this -- there was this preacher who resigned his parish and was going to move on to another place that seemed greener to him and brighter and better....and as he was about to leave, some dear sister came to him and asked him why he was going to go. And he answered as preachers are wont to answer -- "Well," he said, "I think I can do a better piece of work there." And she said, "Why don't you stay here and do a better piece of work?"

And that's what God is saying to us again and again and again -- "Stay where you are! -- stick it out! -- and be My faithful witness there."

.....and as I walk away from this sacred desk I am
constrained to say to you: What would have happened if
Jesus Christ had walked away from Jerusalem?

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE PERIOD OF THE SHORT-CUT"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Exodus 13:17-18

The cemetery where the six of us laid our parents to rest is a gentle slope on the outskirts of my home town. I find myself on occasion being drawn very naturally to that spot. I go there in much the same manner I go on occasion to an empty church....just to be by myself and to have deep and solemn thoughts.

The last time I was there I was fully aware that not so far away I could see the airport for Greater Williamsport Area. At the edge of the cemetery was the highway on which the traffic was moving rapidly - - one car, one vehicle, zip-ping rapidly after another. And then it occurred to me that at the turn of the century, as a teenager left that village not far away from Beirut to board the steamer to come to the promised land of America, it took him three weeks until that journey could be completed. When I first went to Beirut, it was only a matter of hours, as that airport not too far away from the cemetery reminded me.

But upon reflection, I could readily understand why it was necessary for my father to have spent three weeks before he arrived at these shores. There was so much for which he had to be ready....

- immigrants at that time were not easily received --
there was a specific reluctance against those who came from the other shores....
- he couldn't speak any English -- he'd have to work so earnestly and so hard for every inch of ground, as I have told you before, that he would have to gain....
- he'd have to be prepared for the doors that would not be opened to him, and by the same token, by his faith in God he'd have to believe that God would see that some doors would be opened, and people gracious and considerate to help him.....

But it took three weeks . . . it took me only a matter of hours when I made the

same journey.

And by the same token I can tell you this -- as I am in this reflective mood . . . in the early years when Winifred and I first came to you, we would tell the folks back in the hills of home how we could get in the car (when the parsonage was located at 9219 Manchester Road and the younger of our sons a college student in Brooklyn) . . . we'd only have one traffic light to encounter at Four Corners -- then we'd move along rapidly, one super-highway after another, without any interruption when all things went well and with no regulation on the speed as we now have it -- -- we could arrive in Brooklyn in less than five hours, between four and five hours.

Our friends back home were impressed -- to move with such speed! -- to have such an access route to the big city! Well, frankly speaking, that's about all that we could say regarding it. Winifred and I hadn't encountered anybody on the trip. We simply spoke to ourselves. There wasn't a single person that we would stop and greet. We did nothing for anybody . . . no one did anything for us. We arrived very much the same people in Brooklyn as we were in Silver Spring.

One other thing I need to tell you before I announce the title for this sermon, and the text. For those who have done any traveling in the last three or four decades, you may remember that the Cunard Line. You may remember that the Cunard Line used to make much of their slogan: "GETTING THERE IS HALF THE FUN" . . . but in more recent years it's a slogan whose time had passed. People wanted to get there in a hurry. Ours became the age of the jet, the Concorde -- we didn't want to spend days on the ocean. We wanted to spend only hours, and get there as quickly as we could -- the shortest, quickest and the most direct route.

The shortest distance between two points may be a straight line, but it's not always the Safest way to travel. Now the title for this sermon: "THE PERIL OF THE SHORT-CUT." And the text, from the Old Testament, the 17th and 18th verses of the 13th chapter of the Book of the Exodus.

"And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near, but led the people round about to the way of the wilderness . . ."

It is 200 miles from Egypt, to the border of Canaan. Now you can fly that distance in less than an hour. As any student of Bible history knows, it took the Children of Israel 40 years to make the journey, by divine fiat -- God ordained that that's the way it should have been.

I used to ask myself as a youngster, "God, they were down in Egypt for 200 years! Why didn't you get them out of Egypt in a hurry? Why didn't you land them pronto -- just like that! -- in the promised land? You had talked so much about it, you kept it there in front of them, you kept goading them on... and when the time came to leave Egypt, you said they wouldn't go the shortest route, you said they would not go by the way of the Philistines -- they had to zig and to zag...and some of them never made it. And they had all kinds of problems along the road!" . . . and now, that 200-mile stretch, a matter of hours.

My friend, I don't say it in a patronizing fashion, but never underestimate the wisdom of God. God knew very well that having them arrive was not the important thing. This is more than a historical fact with which we deal. It's a basic truth of life. Arriving is not the important thing -- the important thing is the kind of person you become in the process of arriving. Maybe the end of life is not as much to live as it is to learn! You see, God lead them "not by the way of the Philistines, although that was near," for the very simple reason that of all the enemies that the Children of Israel would have to encounter, the Philistines were the most formidable! And they were not yet ready to take on the Philistines! That would come much later. And in the meantime they would encounter a less formidable foe, and the experience they had gained along the way would better equip them when the time came that they had to deal with the Philistines.

Had they encountered the Philistines at the very beginning they would have been conquered and overwhelmed, and immediately enslaved.....well, that's what they had been for 200 years in Egypt! They had been slaves. And as one wit has observed, and very properly so, a slave by the Jordan is no different from a slave by the Nile! And God didn't have enslavement in mind for them as He freed them from the land of bondage and said, "Now head for the promised land" -- they were meant to be free people, but they had to be prepared for the freedom that they would eventually encounter. And they were not yet ready for it. So God leads them round about by the way of the wilderness, using these four decades as a time of continual preparation in order that they might be made ready for what they were yet to experience.

Think of it this way, my friend -- what kind of a God would it be who

every time we wanted a short-cut, would snap His fingers and accommodate us? They needed a God who was something more than a worker of magic and a worker of miracles. Miracles He would work on occasion, of course, but now it wasn't a miracle that they needed. They needed time to blend together as a people. They needed time to learn the responsibility of trust and leadership. They needed time to learn the responsibility of trust and leadership. They needed time to recognize that they were God's people, and Jahweh was to be acknowledged, and His commandments were to be obeyed - - these had to be proved in the crucible of their experience. And that takes time.

He would not immediately catapult them to the border of Canaan because they were not yet ready for Canaan! If I were to find fault with the present generation, I'd have to indict it because they are a people of short-cuts. They want everything yesterday, if not sooner. And there are some things for which we have to be made ready.

From my vantage-point that God has given me of being a shepherd and the bishop of the souls of people for more than four decades, I've become saddened when I think of the younger generation -- who even allow themselves to be called the NOW generation, who want things before they are ready for them...

-- that's one of the things, you see, that's so bad about pre-marital sex. -- let me have it now (before I'm ready to assume the responsibilities that go with a sexual relationship) . . . this most intimate thing that happens between two people means responsibility, and to want it before you're able to assume the responsibility, of damaging persons -- a short-cut, that's what it is. And a short-cut can be very perilous....

-- this short-cut to euphoria -- this quick-fix that will give me a pleasant feeling - - little do they realize that one needs to be prepared to learn to handle happiness!

....and it doesn't just come as a short-cut.

I know a man who is victimized right now, for want of a better term, by a chemical imbalance, because of the medication, the drugs upon which he relied because he wanted a short-cut to health! Recuperation still takes time! You

can't have a convalescence without the time-factor.

I listened very earnestly to Pastor David's announcements, as you might suppose that I would, and I couldn't help but reflect when he lays before us the need to help meet the needs of this family that's come to us from East Europe. Whether you realize it or not, be careful, my friend, you may succumb to the temptation to take a short-cut in allowing yourself to believe that just because we have subscribed into the budget of this congregation a line item that is specified for the resettlement of refugees as though you have done your part . . .

-- it's one of the unsettling things about our government -- this seemingly endless appropriation of money, as though we can take a short-cut and resolve all the ills of humanity by including it as a budget item....
-- it's the perilous route that a mother takes, or a father takes, when to get the kid out of their hair they give the kid 15 - 25 - 30 dollars and say, "Now go!" -- that's a short-cut. It takes time to help people, to get ready, to deal with the problems that have to be dealt with.

A friend whom I highly regard one time gave me an insight into Watergate that I had never heard before. On the basis of certain knowledge that he presumed to have, he told me about this President of ours.....according to his interpretation, who'd like to go down in history as having the greatest vote ever given to any man who ever held the high office of President. And according to my friend, the President was presumed to have said to some of his advisors -- "Get me that mandate!".....and as much as to say, " -- and I don't care how you get it." And maybe Watergate was a short-cut! and maybe he would get that great vote - - - but to have arrived, and then to be a person disgraced by his nation!

Getting there isn't the important thing. It's the kind of person you become in the process, and it takes time to fashion character and to be made ready for tomorrow.

". . . and it came to pass when Pharoah had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the Philistines, although that was near. But God led the people about through the way of the wilderness.

* * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"TO SEE HIS GLORY IN THE MORNING"
(Exodus 16:17)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

For any number of reasons I am easily numbered among those who would much rather get his hair cut than undergo a complete physical examination. I remember so well the apprehension that I experienced when as I sat in his office he scheduled all of the tests -- there was the Upper and Lower GI, there was the metabolism study that had to be made, there were the samples of blood that had to be drawn, there was the seemingly endless number of questions that had to be asked, and the family history and the like that had to be taken. The examination was completed.

I, like you of course, was eager to hear what the results might be. But before he was willing to tell me the result of the examination, he said, "Of all the questions that I have asked you, there is one more that I need to put to you, and the answer to that question may indicate for me, and for you as well, just how you are -- physically, emotionally, spiritually."

.....and what do you suppose that question was? After all the questions had been put to me, after Materia Medica had run its course, there was this question: "How do you feel when you get up in the morning?"

Upon reflection, I recognized the validity of the question, for tell me how you feel when you get up in the morning - - -

-- are you eager to face another day?

-- are you fairly rested?

-- are you afraid of what is yet to come?

-- do you have a measure of confidence in yourself, in your own physical well-being, in your general attitude toward life, and above all else, as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, have you a measure of trust in His willingness to see you through the day?

How do you feel when you get up in the morning?

I can't answer for you, but for myself, I happen to be a morning person. I like the morning. I greet it eagerly, grateful for the rest of the past night -- usually, all other things being equal, I'm pretty well geared up as the day begins anew.

Not everyone. I suppose if I were a mother who had several youngsters for whom I had total responsibility, I couldn't wait until the night came, just to be quiet and to have the household quiet too, and then I could have my quiet time. And maybe morning it would take a bit of doing to get started. But I'm not a mother of two infants, and having that kind of responsibility.

Are you a morning person? In a certain sense every one of us ought to be a morning person. By that I mean not afraid of the day -- willing to face it, and with the knowledge that there are reserves upon which one can draw.

As I stand at the sacred desk this morning I'm constrained now to announce the text for this brief sermon. It's the 17th verse of the 16th chapter of the Book of the Exodus:

" . . . Then in the morning you
shall see the glory of the Lord."

You need to know the historical context. The Children of Israel had been giving Moses and Aaron a rough time. You see, they left Egypt because they had a promise that was made to them, a promise that held before them the day when they would enter the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. But they didn't get there as soon as hoped. They had to wander in the wilderness for any number of years -- four decades, in fact -- and then they had one trial after another. And they found fault with God, and they became very bitter and they allowed themselves to believe, if only for a while, it would have been much better if they had never left Egypt.

You see, we do reach that point where we say yesterday was always better, no matter how bad yesterday was in comparison with today - - we say yesterday was better. "If only things could be as once they were . . ." Who doesn't reason like that? They did.

And then, as though they had put God with His back against the wall, God coming every now and then with His measure of re-assurance says to them -- the words of this text: "In the morning you will see the glory of the Lord" -- as much as to say, "Give me another chance! -- Let me give you another day!" It's

See what tomorrow will bring!" It's a grand text:

"And in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord."

Do you face each day with that kind of imprimatur resting upon it? -- the stamp and the sign and the seal of God? If you can, then you can face it without fear.

I am convinced that there are some people who reach for a sleeping tablet because they want to get today as far behind them as possible. I am fully aware of the fact that there are those of you who when you go to bed at night, carry with you the trials and the tribulations of the day -- you don't have, seemingly, an easy day. And when you go home at night the burdens rest so heavily -- the people you have to encounter, the things that you try to do that you didn't accomplish.... ..and one paragraph after another in the chapter that you wrote has to be marked: FAILED.....FRUSTRATED.....FRUSTRATED. So I can understand why some people reach for a sleeping tablet -- in order to get as far away from today as possible.

....and would you believe it -- perhaps you have not seen it in this way -- but in order to haste the new day, to get to tomorrow as quickly as possible by getting away from today and the sleeping tablet is the shortest-cut by which it can be done.

But then today does come. And when it does come, will there be a spring in the step? - will you be able to hear the beat of the drum?.....which is simply to say, will you see in it the glory of the Lord?

I know a certain thrill when granted I'm given the opportunity of getting up early in the morning, before the darkness has disappeared and before the trace of the dawn comes on the horizon.....it's a very gratifying experience, as though God were fingering the rheostat and degree after degree after degree -- when suddenly the day is there! And when it comes, if you can't begin at any other point, begin at this point -- in seeing the glory of the Lord -- that new day which God gives to you is His gift!

Don't misunderstand me, I don't mean to sell you short, any more than I'd want to sell myself short, but in God's sight, properly understood, none of us deserves another cay because our track record in the past isn't all that wonderful. From the divine perspective, our past is characterized by failure and by fear. And none of us have ever optimized, that is lived to the optimum, what we have already been given. So it's only by the grace of God that a new day is made available to us. Aside from the gift of salvation, the most precious thing that

God gives you is another day - - another chance - - another opportunity.

How it may be with you I don't know, but I hope that as God allows me to do it, I may never be less than sensitive to that declaration that is made once, as we gather together within these hallowed walls, we confess our sins and you hear from the officiating minister the Absolution:

"The Almighty and merciful God grant unto you,
being penitent, pardon and remission of all
your sins, time for the amendment of life,
and the grace and comfort of His Holy Spirit"

....each new day comes as God's opportunity by which we can correct and improve upon yesterday.

In a certain sense this sermon is being preached with two very special people in mind -- a young man, a young woman, who for the first time in their life will stand up in the presence of other people and without any hesitation whatsoever formally declare their commitment to Jesus Christ.

My mind goes back across the decades to that time, not long after World War II, when I was in the golden city of Prague and I observed on a Sunday 35,000 young people marching down the streets behind all kinds of banners -- the first gathering of so-called Democratic Youth from the Eastern block, having come under the Soviet sphere.....and they were demonstrating in no uncertain way in the youth of their years, an allegiance to the Communist philosophy. Right now those very same people are in key positions of leadership in more than one country in the world today.

Conrad and Nikki, I have no idea of what God has in mind for your greater usefulness as your years unfold, but I do know that in the morning of your life -- in these precious teenage years -- you are seeing the glory of the Lord. There is no mistaking it. He's been revealed to you, and in this very moment as we gather here I'm not unmindful of your grandparents, half-a-world away in this particular instance, who are offering a prayer as you give your life to Jesus Christ. You are doing it in the morning of your life. It's an exceedingly precious thing to have the glory of the Lord revealed while you are young.

One of the things for which I've always been grateful as a pastor of the congregation -- I've always wanted to see that young people get their due and proper regard. While we have a concern for all that lies within the spectrum of

the Christian faith, we must give to those who are young -- while they are young -- what they need to receive while they are young. You cannot give to a person at 24 what he should have received when he was 14! And how fortunate you are, in the morning of your life, to have seen the glory of the Lord....

- ...the glory of the Lord as revealed through Scripture
- ...the glory of the Lord as revealed through the face of Jesus Christ, your Lord and Saviour
- ...the glory of the Lord as revealed through the company of believers, people who are drawn together by the Holy Spirit.

I am fully aware of the fact that you live in a world whose strong orientation is toward the scientific. I am fully aware of that. And I am fully aware that here and there you may have teachers who may wittingly or unwittingly endeavor to rob you of the pristine quality of recognizing the glory of the Lord.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are,
Up above the sky so bright,
Like a diamond in the night"

....I grew up on that kind of thing. And I grew up in an environment where I was taught to believe that it was God created the heavens and the earth. In the impressionable days of my years I was taught to recognize the creative hand of God as being completely benevolent, and always around me to sustain me. This is what you experience in your impressionable years. Don't let anyone rob you of how we've introduced you to the glory of the Lord.

But I know today there are those who have taken those same lines, and with their strong scientific orientation, denying the hand of God with the creative touch:

"Twinkle, twinkle, giant stars,
I know exactly what you are:
An incandescent ball of gas,
Condensing to a solid mass."

Twinkle, twinkle, giant star,
I need not wonder what you are,
For seen by spectroscopic ken --
You're helium and hydrogen."

How fortunate you are in the morning -- in the evening -- in the black of night... in the time of your despondency, even in the time of your defeat, to see the Morning Star who is Jesus Christ. May God keep you in this faith, until the shadows lengthen and the evening falls.....and the dawn breaks.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"SERIOUS BUSINESS"
(Mark 6:7-8)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I have a friend who loves the water very, very much. Naturally he spends whatever time he can aboard his boat. I asked him one time what name he had given his craft. He smiled very impishly and said, I named the boat 'SERIOUS BUSINESS' -- you see, whenever my secretary answers the phone and I'm on the water, she can truthfully say "He's out on serious business."

I have no quarrel with those who love the water, I find no fault with those who want to spend as much time there as they possibly can. But I am constrained to tell you, as I stand at this sacred desk this morning, that there are too many Christians -- like my water-loving friend -- meant to be in this world on truly serious business, that make too much time for relaxing, making light of life, and not taking it seriously enough.

There is no other conclusion to which I can come when I read one page of Scripture in particular. It serves as the basis for today's sermon. It's the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, two verses will constitute the text for this sermon:

"And he (meaning Jesus) called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth two by two; and gave them power over unclean spirits; And commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey . . ."

If you read that passage for yourself and scrutinize it carefully, and read not only what's there on the page but what's written between the lines, you'll easily come to the conclusion that there was no question about it now, their lives could never again be the same, and they could never face life without being awed by the responsibility that rested upon them. Of all the people on the face of the earth, they were being chosen, they were being given a divine mandate: no matter where they were, they were never, never to forget whose they were, and whom they were meant to serve, and what it was they were intended to do. They were to be as ambassadors of Jesus Christ....they were to bring to other peoples lives a transforming touch, come wind or weather -- they were meant to be faithful, to be His

obedient servants.

It was an awesome thing that rested upon them now. They responded so well that in no time at all, in this quarter of the earth and in that quarter of the earth the Good News was being heard, the Gospel was being proclaimed, and lives were being redeemed -- all because they took seriously and never allowed themselves to forget, let me say it again and ever so often -- whose they were, whom they were meant to serve, come wind or weather.

Frankly, I have my moments when I have mixed feelings about Judgment. There are times when I allow myself that exceedingly precious luxury that belongs to an adherent of the faith, when in the time of Judgment I need have no fear -- not because of any merit of my own. I shall never be able to do enough good in my lifetime to merit the automatic opening of the Gates of Heaven, but as I lean solely upon the grace of Jesus Christ, I shall not be afraid in the time of Judgment.

But on the other hand I'd be less than honest if I did not tell you that I can be very, very uncomfortable when I think of all the God-given opportunities that have been made available to me to witness to His truth, to witness to His love, and to bring a transforming touch.....and I have not been as faithful as I should have been. I am fully aware of the fact that I shall not pass this way but once, and there are some people whose lives I will never again have the opportunity to touch in the name of Jesus Christ.

When I was ordained a minister of the Gospel -- I don't mind telling you -- I took it very, very seriously, and I take it very seriously to this day. While I love to laugh, and my soul would be atrophied if I could not have my moments of glee . . . but I hope that doesn't mean that I'm less than serious about my calling. I have never been hesitant to let you know and to allow myself to become transparent to you -- that as I stand at this sacred desk I remain constantly awed by the responsibility that God places upon me when I stand here with this open Book in front of me.

What happens before I come to this desk? In view of some of you, you have seen: the preacher kneels, and I read these words that I'm about to share with you now. The language may be a bit archaic, but you can understand the sentiment:

" I seldom come out of the pulpit, but my conscience smiteth me that I have not been more serious and fervent in such a case. It accuses me not so much for want of ornaments or eloquency, nor for letting fall an unhandsome word, but it asketh me, How couldst thou speak of life and death with such a heart? How couldst thou preach of Heaven and Hell in such a careless

and sleepy manner? Dost thou believe what thou sayest? Art thou in earnest or in jest? Shouldst thou not weep over such people? Shouldst not thy tears interrupt thy words?

Truly this is the peal that conscience doth ring in my ears."

I covet for any man who has the good fortune, or any woman, who has the good fortune to be called as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to always take his vows or her vows seriously.

Stephen Neal came and spent a considerable amount of time in this country a number of years ago. He visited theological seminaries. He was greatly disturbed to discover that only rarely did he find a person, soon to be ordained as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who had a passion for souls, whose soul was aflame with the Gospel of love and truth, who was that awed by that responsibility that rested upon him -- once he knew himself or herself to be called into the service of the Master.

I don't want to be numbered among those people who look back and think that whatever happened yesterday was always better. In all honesty I don't know that people in days gone by took Jesus Christ more seriously than some of you take Him today.....but I do know that when He was taken seriously, a difference set in; and when people failed to take Him seriously, a price had to be paid.

There was a day when on a Saturday night, people thought of a Saturday night as the time when they studied their Sunday School lesson, when they got ready for the Lord's Day. They took it that seriously.....

-- my mentor in the faith, Harvey Daniel Hoover, the sone of a York County farmer, remembered how, if he was heading toward the entry of the barn on a Saturday night and he was whistling, his father would say, "Cut that out, Harvey! Tomorrow is Sunday!"

....you got ready for Sunday, you took Sunday that seriously....

-- I can still remember, as I told you before, that store in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the merchant on a Saturday night drew the blinds and the shades heavily so that his merchandise was not on view on Sunday, because he wanted people to concentrate on things of the spirit when the Lord's Day came....

....a far cry from what happens on the merchandising front on a Sunday today.....

-- old Jacob Strive, in Hiawatha, Kansas, when we were guests in his home, would never allow a single one of us to eat a single morsel of the breakfast that was spread so sumptuously until he first read a long chapter from the Bible and then insisted -- 80 years of age that he was -- that all of us, just as he did, got down on our knees and he prayed a long prayer....

.....he took seriously the gift of each new day, and he'd begin it by witnessing to God's truth and to His love, even as he turned the pages of the Good Book.

I don't know whether people take things as seriously today as they did then, but I do know, if they had not taken them seriously in the other day, some of us would not have what we cherish now. I thank God again and ever so often, as I heard Pastor David refer to Camp Nawakwa where 100 of our youngsters will come under the influence of advisors and counselors and teachers and staff.....as an impressionable youngster I thank God ever so often for those advisors and counselors and staff who took seriously their responsibility to witness for Jesus Christ, and my life has never again been the same.

I once read a biography of Suzanne, the mother of John and Charles Wesley and perhaps a dozen other youngsters, and the thing that I remember most about that biography was this: that she made it her business as a mother, by a mandate of God as she saw it, to do for her children what she was meant to do, and not to allow others to assume the role that God has assigned her. By deliberate intent she gave each one of those twelve children one, two, three hours a week of undivided attention, that their souls should be nurtured in the faith. That's how seriously she took it.

Read again that 6th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, how He took a handful of people and He said, "You of all people, I'm entrusting this responsibility, you will move forward. I do not intent for you to retreat. You'll only have one direction in which to go." -- something like the motto of the Coast Guard, you know: "You have to go out -- but you don't have to come back." There was that commanding officer who always kept behind him a river....believing honestly that his untried troops would fight better if they knew that there was not the possibility of retreat. The imperative of God remains: "Forward! Forward! Move on! Touch other people's lives -- be faithful! You don't always have to win, but you have to be faithful!" You have to take it that seriously.

I can't speak as to whether yesterday people took God more seriously than they take Him now, but I say to you with all the strength that my soul can command, when they did take Him seriously, there isn't a single one among you who can't stand up and bear testimony to the fact that you are what you are in Jesus Christ because of those who took His commands seriously.

In the baptism of this precious child, the Kingdom of God goes forward person by person, and one generation at a time. We are meant to be faithful -- today, and always. It's as serious as all that.

Martin Niemoller -- I think of him frequently, it's a salutary exercise for my soul -- was that great and worthy pastor in the church in a suburb of Berlin, who because of his faithfulness to the Gospel became a personal prisoner of Adolph Hitler for eight-and-a-half years. Somewhere in his writings Martin Niemoller shared with us a dream that he had, and in that dream he sees Adolph Hitler standing before the Bar of Judgment...

....and God's representative says to Adolph Hitler, "In the face of all the hell that you let loose on earth, how do you plead, guilty or not guilty?" And Adolph Hitler in the dream that Martin Niemoller had said, "Not guilty."

And God's representative says, "How in the name of Jesus Christ can you say that you are not guilty?" And in that dream Martin Niemoller hears Adolph Hitler respond by saying, "Jesus Christ? -- Jesus Christ? Who ever spoke to me about Jesus Christ?"

....and then the dream takes a peculiar twist, and now God's representative in that dream turns to Martin Niemoller, who is having the dream, and God's representative says, "Martin Niemoller, you knew Adolph Hitler -- you were in his company. How can he say that no one ever spoke to him about Jesus Christ?"

What you and I know about Jesus Christ, my friend, you and I never found out first for ourselves. It's because someone else took it seriously enough to tell us. Now you think about that.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"GOD'S CHILDREN: PRESENT TENSE"
(I John 3:2)

LIFT OUR EYES, O God, beyond our own horizon, and enable us to think of those who gather in any place this day, wherever Your Word is proclaimed and your love is shared. And to the end that we would receive a blessing in this place, may Your Holy Spirit lay hold upon us now. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

I can only tell it to you as I read it: a clever chap in Brooklyn, the owner and operator of an automobile repair shop, some time ago took an old car, in fact he took two old cars, same model, same type -- and he put them together, and he made one car out of two.....which simply means that the car that he fashioned out of the two old cars now has: two fronts...two motors...and two steering wheels. Don't tell me how it could work, but it's been maintained that it can be driven both ways -- or I should say, either way -- and when it's standing still no one knows in which direction it's headed.

I know a lot of people like that. They'd like to have it both ways -- to go back into the past, to long for the days that once were, to capitalize upon nostalgia, to think of the giants in those days.....or if you will, to think of the future, the other direction -- a time yet to come, when all of one's dreams hopefully would be realized.

Now this in itself is not bad, to prize the past, to think of the blessed hope of the future -- that too can be good. But, if to prize the past and to long for the future permits one to ignore the present moment, that can be dastardly. But it happens again and ever so often.

Now let me tell you to whom this sermon particularly is being preached. Well, it may be of some interest to you to know that it's already been preached to the man who is preaching it. For when I laid the Scriptures in front of me some time ago, I found myself being gripped by the particular text which serves as a foundation for all that you're going to hear as this sermon unfolds.....and you could be the kind of person that I was, at that particular time when this passage of Scripture came to meet the deep need of my soul.

I had been despondent, I had been discouraged, I had been depressed. It's a terrible thing! Ask Winifred! -- she knows how I endure it. But in recent time, I'm delighted to tell you, like the man from the East, I've allowed myself to believe that this, too, shall pass. But in the meantime -- it can be pure hell!

...and then, as God would have it, as I was studying my Scriptures in my own personal devotions, I came upon these precious words -- words, I dare say, of an old man, who was qualified to speak out of his own experience and out of his relationship with God. I like to think of him as the beloved disciple. He was a man named John.

No matter what your school of thought may be, I'm willing to believe that he was one of the twelve, and as he became an old man he was constrained to write, and to speak, and to share with other people what had become increasingly precious to him. He wrote three letters, all bear his name. And this text is from the first of the three Letters that he wrote, it's the third chapter and the second verse. Let me give it to you according to J. B. Phillips translation:

"Here and now," says John, ". . . dear friends, we are God's children. What we shall be has not yet been disclosed; but we know that when He appears we shall be like him"

.....like bold-face type, it gripped me -- here and now I'm a child of God.....which is simply to say I have a Heavenly Father, I'm not an orphan, He cares for me, He has a concern for me, and all that He's promised can come true -- today.

Weak as we are, we have a way, you know, of looking back to the past and thinking that was the better day. And the past has been good, because God was operative in the past as well! And sometimes when you and I read the Bible we allow ourselves to think that those were the better days, when there were giants in those days, and there were people who were obedient to God's will, and they would live out their faith and they would conquer new territory and they would establish land-marks that hold us in good stead today.

But we make a mistake if we believe that God was only operative in the past. Why, even at 19 years of age when I went off to college, I had a teacher who tried to tell me that God did a day's work with Creation....and then He said, "That's it!" -- like a watchmaker who designs the watch and puts all the parts together and then winds it and puts it on the shelf and walks away from it, as though he no longer has any interest or concern for it. Some people very foolishly sometimes, when they think of the past, they think that's the way it was -- God acted then....but they

can't allow themselves to think that God can be active in the present moment.

I succumb to it occasionally when I go back to my home town that I dearly love.when I was growing up as a youngster, 3,000 people -- it seemed fairly idyllic to me then, even now, despite the changes that have set in but I look back and remember, almost everybody went to church on Sunday, one of the five different churches we had in that village, and everything shut down. The only place that was open on Sunday, and limited hours, was the drug store, in order to meet the emergencies that may have arisen.....

And I have my moments when I foolishly permit myself to believe it was easier then to preach the Gospel -- people were more conducive and related well to it. But that's not true. It was a good day. But it wasn't the best that God had in mind. But there are people, you see, who look back and think that all that ever was is over, as though God said, This is it.

Let me tell it to you again -- I don't suppose there's a preacher in the country who doesn't use this at one time or another, especially when you think of the nation's capital, when you think of the cab drivers that we used to have...

....and this man who was his fare got into the cab, and the cabbie -- there are always authorities, you know, on everything -- and as he was taking him around the streets of Washington the fare said, "And what's that place?" ...and it happened to have been the National Archives, and you know what's written in front there: "ALL THAT IS PAST IS PROLOGUE"....and the man in the cab said to the driver, "Khat does that mean?".....and the cabbie said, "That means: Brother, you ain't seen nothing yet!"

And you and I must be constrained to remember that as far as God's concerned, there is so much more yet to be done, and so much more yet to happen, and I fervently believe that God exercises a kind of economy. He's not going to waste the past -- he's going to build on it, and fashion the future out of it. And to do that He needs the present.

And then there are people who foolishly allow themselves, as they become blind to the present, to think only of that which is yet to come, when they dream of that better day, who are always thinking of how much better it's going to be tomorrow and the day after that.....and in the meantime become absolutely insensitive to the glorious things that are occurring in the present moment. So like the man who had that

automobile -- able to move into the past, and able to move into the future -- we can be like that.....but at the same time, absolutely useless and of little value as we stand still and are blinded to the demands and the opportunities of the present moment.

Said John, "Here and now we're God's children . . ." -- which means we have a Heavenly Father and we're not bereft, and if we are God's children then we are meant to believe that we are God's children, and if we're to believe that we're God's children, then we're meant to behave as God's children. God has work that has to be done today, and you and I should seize the opportunity to do His work -- today. In a certain sense it's the only time that we really have because the past did not fully belong to us, and the future may not be ours. But what we have is today. Says John, remember it, remember it well -- today you're a child of God, this is who you are, and behave accordingly.

Chrysostom was a great preacher when the Church was very young, and I have been told from what I have read that he had a sermon especially designed for parents. And what in the world do you suppose he'd preach about when he'd preach to parents? -- On The Wise Choice of the Child's Name. He fervently believed that people ought to use Biblical names for their children. And as they would grow older the parent would take time to explain to the child why they chose that Biblical name, who the Biblical character was, and hopefully, how the child, as the child became older, would exemplify in his own life the basic traits and characteristics of that person for whom he was named.

Who are you, my friend? How will you answer? How will you identify yourself? They tell me this is an age that's characterized by an identity crisis, people really don't know who they are. I get a thrill how every now and then, when the younger of our two sons, now a young man entering fully into adulthood, will call me on the phone and say, "Pop, don't worry, I've got it all together!" Any person who names the name of Christ is meant to have it all together, granted he knows exactly who he is.

This is why I'm so grateful that I belong to a tradition that makes much of infant baptism. The Christian Church, when it introduced the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, dealt magnificently with this whole identity crisis. From the very beginning we're told who we are. For in the Sacrament of Baptism the sign and the seal and the mark of God's favor is planted once and forever: I am a child of God.

I don't know how it may be with you, but I honestly believe that in the Day

of Judgment, when we're ushered to the Great Gate, figuratively speaking, and God's representative will say, "Who are you?" . . . how will you answer? You may answer in any one of a number of different ways.....

-- you may say, "I'm a sinner saved by grace" -- the very trumpets of Heaven may sound. As for myself, I could answer that way very easily, and probably will. But I shall also answer, "I am a child of God, and I want to be in my Father's house"but I don't have to wait to die to say that, you see! I can be in my Father's house today.

Let me go back and remind you that we make a mistake if we allow ourselves to believe that all that was good is over, and to keep yourself strongly attached to the past. This is always an obstacle course that we have to run, to think only of that which had been, or only of that which is yet to come. After 26 years, I have a confession to make to you people, you who in the Family of God, for whom God has given me responsibility. When I first became your Pastor, and I still say to this day, I was stimulated and challenged. I hope the day will never come when I cannot say that. But I think you need to know that for a while I didn't give you everything that you were entitled to. Now be patient with me.

You see, I had been for over fifteen-and-a-half years where I began my ministry, and they were wonderful people too. There our two boys were baptized, and one of them was confirmed in the Christian faith, and Winifred and I were married. And there I knew what a wonderful thing it was to have a people call you for the first time: Pastor.....and then in God's plan I was called here. And I honestly believe that this is where He meant me to come at that particular point in my life. But none of you may ever know how often I thought of myself in those early months as a kind of a 'visiting fireman.' I still had the tug of the past, I still had Messiah's Church in my veins.

Then one Sunday I went back there, and I found myself in the congregation and I worshipped.....and then it hit me like a bolt out of the blue: this chapter is over! I can't go back again. God has put me somewhere else....and there's a new chapter to be written, and that chapter is to be written now -- with all the energy that God could bestow upon me I was meant to channel into your life, and fervently I've tried to do that, as you know.

-- behold, here and now, today, we're meant to be all that God wants us to be -- today.

You'll understand how I tell you this. In the years that God has given me

to be your Pastor I have gone on only one assumption, that it is possible by the grace of God to be all that a congregation ought to be. And I never allowed myself to believe that this was something that I was going to place off into some distant future in the hands of my successor...in the great moments that we've had together in our relationships in allowing ourselves to believe that we could be all that a Family in God was meant to be -- now!

I wish you could have heard the tone in his voice when Dr. Fred Neudoerffer, our special guest last Sunday, called me, and the letter that he wrote as he reflected upon the kind of thing that he experienced here last Sunday -- the vitality that becomes your commitment and your devotion to the things of the Lord. It's happening -- now -- today.

I know that it's been said that we're the most anxiety-ridden generation in the history of the world, and we suffer from a neurosis. But here's the answer: We are God's children, and we're meant to believe that and to behave like His children -- today. We may falter, we may fail, there is none righteous, there is none perfect. I think of that grand and good British preacher who loved all of his people with intensity of devotion....and there was that character who had to do battle constantly with the bottle -- he never quite licked it. But his pastor, God bless him, said to him, "Whenever you feel it coming on -- or even whenever it's overcome you -- get to me, and we'll talk and we'll pray."

....and God bless that drunkard. Despite his drunkenness he experienced a measure of remorse and he said, "Padre, Padre, tell me I'm in the gutter -- go ahead, Padre, tell me I'm in the gutter; but also tell me I don't belong here."

This is what God is always saying to us. We're not exactly where we ought to be. And then God, like that preacher puts his arm around the drunk, God puts His arm around us, and He says, "But remember who you are meant to be, and begin it now!"here and now we're God's children -- today.

I smile broadly when I think of some people who in no way at all today reflect a bit of Heaven -- who in no way at all reflect a bit of Heaven, who foolishly allow themselves to believe that some day they're going to thoroughly enjoy Heaven. If you can't begin to enjoy Heaven now, you're not going to enjoy it then.

I remind myself of that lady, when train travel was much more popular than it is now, got on at a certain point, headed for her destination, and all the time she was in the coach she was complaining about the trip, things that happened to her

in her past, and anticipating all the terrible things that were going to happen to her once she arrived at the next town where she was going to live....when suddenly the conductor announced that she had arrived at her destination. And she honestly admitted, "If I'd of known I was going to get there as soon as I did, I would have enjoyed the trip much more than I did."

Today will soon be over -- enjoy it! Let God lay hold upon it.
Make the most of it. Beloved, said the old man, here and
now -- today -- you're God's child.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CARPENTER'S SON"
(Luke 2:49)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son, Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

When the historian of the future looks back to the political scene in the great state of Massachusetts, much, no doubt, will be written regarding one family in particular. The sons of the multi-millionaire dominated the scene in that particular area, casting their lengthened shadow across the entire country, one decade after another.

Two of the old man's sons had made their mark. They had achieved their goal. Presumably inspired by their success, and prodded on undoubtedly by his mother, the youngest of all of them decided to try his political fortune, and to become a candidate for the U. S. Senate.

Understandably, there were those who criticized his candidacy considerably. Not all were enthusiastic about his bold attempt to plunge forward so soon. You see, he was young, so very young, and above all that, he was so very inexperienced. And having said that, in the minds of far too many people some of the political pundits believed there would be this nagging thought: what would this man who had always led such a sheltered and easy life know about the plight of the ordinary workman?

....a few honestly believed that family wealth and ties as far as the family was concerned with the White House would hold him in good stead.....others believed that such a relationship of wealth and ties to the White House would be negative factors.....

Again, let it be said, there was that nagging question: What would this man, who had led such a sheltered life, and such an easy life, with his financial future absolutely secure to the day he died -- what would he really know about the lot of the average working person?

There came a day while on a campaign swing when he was shaking hands up and down the factory line -- and getting a good reception, I have to say -- when some

crotchety old codger -- there's always one -- you could see the brazen features on his face -- held him up as the candidate was shaking his hand. Now all was going well up to this point. But now came the awkward moment, the kind of a moment that his campaign aides and assistants dreaded as a possibility. You could see it coming.....

....as the old crotchety chap with the steel-like eyes
threw the candidate for a loop when he said, "Mr.
Kennedy, I understand that you never did a day's work
in your life . . "

Well, as one recorder observed it, you could cut the tension with a knife. What with the young political candidate being nervous now, and blushing, what could he say? His assistants, his advisors became very edgy.....and the press, of course -- they were scribbling like mad! Embarrassed and jolted, Teddy Kennedy, the candidate, remained understandably silent....

....finally, what seemed the longest time, the factory
worker, the old codger started to walk away -- only to
turn suddenly and to surprise everybody by bluntly saying --
let me give you his unvarnished language as he put his hand
on Kennedy's shoulder - -

"Let me tell you something, son, --
you ain't missed a blamed thing!"

You may rest assured that the Bay State politicians made much of the incident. The ice was broken. Everybody now was relaxed, and they even made capital of the thing as they repeated it wherever the campaign tour went. Teddy Kennedy was taken off the hook, and the day was saved from becoming a fiasco.

But upon reflection, the old gent's barb remains a sad commentary upon many who honestly admit that their day's work is not something to be celebrated, but something that has to be endured. More than one observer of the human scene is forced to admit that there is something disquieting about the common attitude to daily work. Very few can give a reason for it beyond the necessity to earn a living and to provide for one's family. What now can be said on this particular Sunday so near Labor Day? Is there a Christian perspective regarding one's day's work? There was a preacher, you know, long before the day of Jesus Christ, related to that book called Book of The Ecclesiastes, who said something about surveying the human scene, and then coming to the conclusion that it is nothing

better but that a man should enjoy his work. For that is his lot. No matter how you may read it, from the dawn of creation onward, God has intended that a person should work.

We have our moments when we think idyllically of some South Seas island where people can live without extending any kind of laborious effort, but that's a myth! It's man's lot that he should work. But what do you do with people who find it a tedious thing, a hum-drum thing, a monotonous thing, a thing to be dreaded? What do you do with a person who hates Monday morning, and who lives for Friday afternoon? -- whose patron saint, I presume, is a school teacher whose theme song was "IFTG" -- "It's Friday, thank God" -- what do you do with a person who goes about his day's work only because he's looking toward retirement when the time comes when he doesn't have to work any more -- he finds it that tedious, that monotonous, and a thing of drudgery?

I've always been very honest with you, I've never allowed myself to be anything less than transparent when I've come to the sacred desk -- I remember how when I attended a convention of the Lutheran Church in Atlantic City, when on the convention floor there was a pastor who was begging at that time and pleading with the church to lower the retirement age so that he could get his pension at 62 because, he said -- (I can still hear his words ringing in my ears

as I took offense) -- "I'm sick and tired of it --

I can't wait to get out!"

Is there anything to be said to the person who cannot believe as the preacher in Ecclesiastes maintained as he surveyed the human scene -- "A man should enjoy his work . . it is his lot!"

Did I not read the other day of that woman who spent her time, hour after hour, day after day, making imitation raspberry seeds for imitation raspberry jam? What inspiration could one draw from that? How could one be expected to enjoy doing that kind of thing? Oh, I'll grant you it's a far cry from the day -- Rudy Schuetzler, he sat right where you sit -- when he was a member of this congregation, Raymond Moses Kluttz -- who knew a measure of delight in telling me how, when he grew up in North Carolina, everything that they ate on their table they grew in their own garden, or came from the animals that they raised and dressed and preserved. One could see the end as well as the beginnings of one's efforts.

...he also told with a measure of pride about the suit that he wore, that was made from wool that came from the sheep that they raised -- they were self-sufficient....the

beginning and the end he could always see....

It's a far cry to today's person who labors, either as a bureaucrat who is caught up in the machinery of it all and never quite sees the end product or his relationship to it.....or the person who works on the assembly line, robot-fashion, to live to see the day now when robots work as human beings. How can there be enjoyment in that?

I don't know what I would do if I ever found myself dreading tomorrow morning -- or any morning . . . I am fortunate, you see, I'm numbered among those, as long as God gives me energy I would want to put myself to some useful task. And therein lies the enjoyment, no doubt.

From the Christian perspective there are two things to keep in mind. But before I talk about the Christian perspective I'm in duty bound to remind you that the workman has in Jesus Christ a model. When you first think of Jesus Christ, what's the image that comes to your mind immediately? There are eighteen stained-glass panels in this room where you are now. Happily, those who designed this church knew very well that people such as you, their minds would wander at some point in the service, and nothing should be lost. Perhaps there would be a moment when you'd look at the stained-glass window and a sermon would come to you through them. In these panels the life of Jesus Christ is portrayed -- you see Him in one role after another, in one chapter after another, and fortunately in one of the windows on this side, you see Him as the carpenter.

You must never forget that. You may think of Him as the preacher....

-- you may think of Him as the teacher...

-- you may think of Him as the miracle-worker....

-- you may think of Him as the man who made friends
and influenced people and recruited them for
the Kingdom, giving them unforgettable pictures
of God, making God's claim upon them....

But you must never forget, for the greater part of His life He wasn't the itinerant preacher. That was only for three years. You must also remember -- and the text which is the basis for this sermon comes from the 2nd chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, the old King James translation, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" . . . and having said that, He went down to Nazareth and from the time He was twelve years of age until thirty years of age -- the greater part of His life -- He walked around ankle-deep in wood-shavings, and His hands were placed upon an adze and a saw, and a hammer.

There was that moment in His life when that voice from Heaven said, "This is

my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." - - and at that point He had yet to preach His first sermon! He had won favor in God's sight by making plows, and yoke for oxen, and lintels.

Jesus was for twenty years a village carpenter. It is incredible to think that for all those years He was putting in time, waiting to begin His so-called religious work. But the poet puts it this way:

"What was He doing all that time,
From boyhood then to early prime?
Was He then idle, or the less
About his Father's business?"

Say it again and ever so often: each day in Nazareth was sacramental as He made plows and thresholds and lintels and offered them up to God.

"Very dear the cross of shame,
Where He took the sinner's blame;
In the tomb alone the Saviour lay
Until the third day came.
But He bore the self-same load,
And He went the same high road,
When the Carpenter of Nazareth made
Common things for God."

Now, let's get this in perspective: we do have a model as Christians when we come to face our day's work. And to begin with, you may consider yourself doing work that is pleasing in God's sight if it is done for the common good. That's the point at which to begin. Happy indeed is that person who can permit himself to believe that whatever he is doing will be for the benefit of somebody else. From the Christian perspective, that puts the halo on it.

Luther was absolutely right when he maintained that the Christian cobbler's work was Christian, not because he stitched the symbol of the cross upon the tongue of a shoe.....but because he did his work well, and because in essence the work he did became the answer to some mother's prayer that her child would remain healthy -- and as he wore these shoes which the cobbler repaired, he could be protected against the foul weather and against the elements.

I have told you before, haven't I, about the person who went looking for epitaphs? - - who found the gem of an epitaph in a graveyard in an old Scottish village. I can't give you the man's name, but I can tell you what the epitaph said:

" . . HERE LIES THE BODY OF
(and then the man's name)
WHO FOR 40 YEARS
COBBLED SHOES IN THIS VILLAGE TO THE
GLORY OF GOD . . . "

They made a mistake in that village, you see, if they allowed themselves to believe that he was only doing God's work when he was teaching Sunday School! There's a church bulletin that reads properly, "The service begins when the worship ends." The Kingdom of God is advanced -- not only here . . . but the Kingdom of God is truly advanced where people live and labor and lay their hands to some useful and valued task to the good of somebody else!

And the second thing follows so naturally, or perhaps the second thing gives place to what's already been mentioned: the Pauline admonition: "Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God." When a person has that opportunity, he can enjoy his work. Again let it be said, whatever image you have of Jesus Christ, never forget -- for eighteen years, the greater part of His life, He laid His hands to a useful task.

"If Jesus built a ship,
She would travel trim;
If Jesus roofed a barn,
No leaks would be left by Him;
If Jesus planted a garden
He would make it like Paradise;
If Jesus did my day's work,
It would delight His Father's eyes."

I think of it almost every year at this time -- is this now the third or the fourth fall since we've begun the use of the Enlarged Facility? I have one regret in relationship to the construction of the Enlarged Facility. I wish we could have done what we did in Messiah's Church in South Williamsport after we had constructed the Christian Education Building there.....we had a special service, the very first service once the building had been completed, in which we invited all the crafts-people, all the people who had laid their hands to constructing the building, to be present for a service. I wish we would have done that here.

Now allow me this moment of fantasy . . .

...had we done that, and Jesus Christ would have appeared on the scene in person, and in your behalf I would have ushered Him forward - - - I honestly believe He would have turned away as we headed toward the chancel and He might have said, "I think I'd be more comfortable being seated with the workmen, with the carpenters."

Now before I walk away from this sacred desk let me read for you a paragraph or two from an old English bishop's book called "The Church Victorious" . . . and once I have read what I am going to read to you there will be no need for further comment:

" . . . A girl of sixteen was dying in one of the great hospitals. She had been the eldest child of a large and poor family. Her mother had died when the youngest child was born, and for years she had spent her girlhood bearing the burdens of a home and mothering the younger children.....she had been literally worked to death, and was dying of tuberculosis. Her face was white, and her features were drawn. Her hands were rough with the work of the hard years . . "

(now this is the part that I regret to read
to you, because there's this kind of person)

" . . . around the wards came a lady visitor, a pious prig, I call her, a very narrow, self-righteous person -- questioning people about their salvation, and being so cock-sure of her own. She questioned the patient about her religious life - -

'Have you been confirmed?' 'No' came the reply.

'Have you been baptized?' 'No' came the reply again.

Had she gone to Sunday School? - - No -- no, she had
never had time for that.

The questions went on, and all were answered with a weary 'No.' The visitor, self-righteous, took a very dim view of the situation. And now, thinking she was hitting below the belt, I presume, she said, 'What will you do when you die, and you have to tell God that you were never baptized, you were never confirmed, you never went to Sunday School?' . . . the girl who had given herself to others in hard work, hard daily work, which itself had been a glorious contribution to the Kingdom of God, though she never thought of it as such, lay two thin transparent work-stained hands on the coverlet and lifted to her questioner big, dark glowing eyes, full of a peace too deep to be disturbed as she made an answer that is too sublime for comment.....as very quietly she whispered these words,

'Well, I guess I'll only have to show Him
my hands.' . . . "

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

" - - TO SEE THE UNCONSIDERED GRACES"

O GOD, We make so little time to do
this sort of thing, to give some
measure of undivided attention to
the interpretation of Your Word.
That we should make the most of
this opportunity, enlighten us by
Your Holy Spirit. Through Jesus
Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who when
He came, came preaching. Amen.

Psalm 51:15

The post office address, as I remember it, was simply: 3 W. 65th Street, Central Park West -- the location of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in Manhattan, New York City. On more than one occasion Winifred and I in years gone by had the good fortune to worship there. We were always inspired, we were always edified, particularly as we sat under the preaching of the man who was the prince of the pulpit in those days, the Rev. Dr. Paul E. Scherer.

Then there came that time, as I understand it, when for a while he was stricken with a rare malady -- something had happened to his vocal chords, he was denied the privilege of going to the sacred desk. He was, to all intents and purposes, placed under a 'sentence of silence.' The weeks passed into months, and then the day came when he was able to return to the place that he so much loved. Skilled artist as he was with words.....now the congregation watched him as he moved toward the pulpit, undoubtedly a memorable Sunday indeed, the like of which they had not known before, the like of which perhaps they have not known since - - all eyes upon him, and ears, of course, intent, concerned as to what his first words might be.

What do you suppose they were? Words that are the text for today's sermon, the 15th verse of the 51st Psalm. Now, mark you, as he would speak those first words as he stood at the sacred desk, undoubtedly they would be given some insight, they would be made privy as to what it was that he experienced in the depth of his own soul as he was denied the privilege to go to the sacred desk.....these were his first words:

"O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall
show forth thy praise."

Had he been as some of us are, he could have used the occasion to cry out against God or fate that had so afflicted him. Nobly intentioned as he was, he

could have said, "God, you did not make me very happy when you kept me from the sacred desk -- you called me to this end, and I've given it everything that I have. God, think of all those sermons I could have preached, all the times I could have interpreted your precious Word for these people for whom you've given me a measure of responsibility . . . God, think of all the people I could have counseled -- but you sealed my lips. I could not speak to them the words that I would ask you to give to me. And those times will never return . . . "

....he could have complained, he could have recited one lamentation after another. But as you sense it, his first words were a Te Deum --

"O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise."

Did it ever occur to you how easy it is for us to lament and to curse? We are conditioned, presumably, by the world in which we live, surrounded constantly by the untoward and the ugly and the unwarranted and the unwelcome. It impinges upon us at every side, and we become conditioned to the point where it's so difficult for us to see any good thing anywhere -- when all the while God is surrounding us with endless, countless mercies....or as somebody has said, "unconsidered grace."

I am tempted at times to cancel the subscription for the newspaper that I read daily. I've become so tired that as I turn from one page to another, a parade of all the misery in the world, and I have my moments when I'm inclined to think that columnists and reporters alike seem to make a business of not wanting to see the brighter side of a person, not wanting to see the better side of a situation. I have never hesitated to be transparent among you...on more than one occasion when I've stood here I've laid bare my soul to you. And now here comes another confession, another admission: last night, in my evening devotions, I was constrained to ask God to have mercy upon me, and to forgive me. For I remembered how, in this past week, three different times -- caught up in three different table conversations -- wittingly or unwittingly I steered the conversation in this direction, I introduced the Tylonol-tampering-terror!

-- what! -- with a million other things that we could have talked about that would have gladdened their souls of the people who were around about me, enlightened our minds....

....I became a party to dwelling on the bizarre and the mad and the horrible.

So the Psalmist, in his day, could have allowed himself one lament after another. But being the honest man that he was -- read the text carefully, my

friend - - "O Lord, You open my lips, that You may be praised . . . " We are so conditioned by the circumstances around us, by the environment, that it becomes exceedingly difficult to think any good thing about anything. And because we need to see the unconsidered graces, and because we need to focus upon the common mercies, we must again and ever so often ask God to open our eyes and to open our lips. For we must praise, and we must be made aware of the goodness that is there.

Now don't get me wrong, I have little patience with people who seem to make it a business at times of going around trying always to say some nice thing about someone or something, and trying to stretch the truth in order to be nice. This pointlessness in their politeness. I wouldn't have you be as that lady who was annoyed her pastor there in the hinterland. She was a little old lady who was always going around trying to say something nice about something, forcing the fact on more than one occasion. And becoming so irritated and annoyed one day he could not help it, he said to her, "I am sick and tired of your always seeing nice things to say about people - - I suppose you'd even have a good word to say about his satanic majesty the Devil!" . . . and she immediately countered, "Well, I'll say this about him -- he's always on the job!"

My mother, of blessed memory, would take us youngsters every now and then to the homes of the neighbors, and I recall one place in particular -- I passed it on the street when I was last home . . .

....the little boy that remains in all of us, as if we are privileged to recall something as this - - I can still smell the delightful aroma of freshly-baked molasses cookies.... Knowing the craving in that little boy's stomach, and mind as well, she offered one, and then when we were about to leave, she gave me several to take home with me. And in my eagerness I was on my way until I was brought back by my mother, who graciously and gently prodded me by saying, "But, Raymond, haven't you forgotten something?"

Our situation is such that even God must remain the prodder. Martin Luther was absolutely right in his interpretation of the Third Article of the Creed -- that it's God who inspires us, it's God who enlightens us. Let it be said and said repeatedly -- you and I could not even think the thoughts of God if it were not God who enters our minds and encourages us to do so. So stained are we by original sin, so conditioned by the wicked world in which we live, that

again and ever so often the prayer-of-prayers must become ours, "O Lord, open Thou my lips . . and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise."

In the Chapel of The Grateful Heart that has come to mean so much to this parish, dear old Ellwood DeLong very properly chose a number of different symbols. There's one that's a carving. It's directly above the Communion rail -- it's the symbol for the Holy Spirit: the breath of God descending upon us that we might be inspired to think His thoughts. We do live in a world where there is countless evidence of His mercies. But we must school ourselves, and we must respond to His leading that we might see them.

I should have brought it with me to the pulpit....I left it on the prayer desk. It was dark this morning when I came to church, but there was enough light when I left the parsonage steps to be able to see one tiny blossom on an azalea bush. The season for blooming azaleas is over! But as though God were giving one more sign -- "My mercies know no season, they continue on and on and on, come wind or weather." She who wrote these lines was absolutely right, as they prick your conscience and mine as well:

"Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only the person who sees takes
off his shoes and worships.
The rest sit around and eat blackberries."

...."O Lord, open my eyes -- open my lips, that I
may consider evidence after evidence of your claim
upon us and your touch upon this world."

This is the sermon that I am in duty bound to preach to you today, on this Sunday in the calendar of this congregation that marks the Festival of the Harvest. What with less than 5% of this congregation having a garden, we need to do this sort of thing. We need to see the evidence of God's constant mercy in every plant that grows, in every flower that blooms. You ask me what kind of a three-week period did Winifred and I have amid the hills of home? As salutary as anything was the almost routine morning walk up the hill to where Elizabeth and Karl live, and there in the side of the hill, their highly productive vegetable garden and flowers -- a constant reminder of our dependency upon the good earth. . . . "O Lord, open my eyes that I may see . . . part my lips, O God, that I may sing your praise."

During this last service a child was baptized and named for Jesus Christ. Somewhere in the ceremony the child was taken in the arms of one of the pastors

and they walked down the aisle together, bringing that child very near to the congregation that was present. And as that was being done I could not help but think of that Italian village a number of years ago, when there was the devastation of a volcanic eruption. The village was destroyed and only a few people remained. The outlook was very, very dismal. But the most encouraging thing that happened in that village was when the Roman Catholic priest of that town walked amid all the devastation and destruction and carried in his arms a child --

-- as much as to say: "Look! Focus your eyes here! God has not given up on His world!" - -

...and every time a child is born -- every time a baby comes into this world -- say it, and say it over and over again to yourself, "This is a sign that God has not given up on us. He is re-investing himself in human nature." - - "O Lord, open my eyes to see.....O Lord, open my lips that I may praise you for this."

There is a lesson that only the harvest season can teach. John Arnold expressed it superbly. Let me read his words for you, that you may not miss a single word: "The world has seen the passing of many civilizations, but the harvest which God ordained before any of them has out-last-ed them all. The world has seen many wicked men, but the sun and the rain have not ceased to fertilize their fields. So the love of God endures through all time and through all evil. Nothing can stop God from expressing it."

One day there will be the harvest of the soul. It will all be over. The season for maturation will have run its course, and in the time of Judgment happy indeed is he who can say, "O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the outstretched arms of my Saviour . . . O Lord, open thou my lips, that in the moment of death I may praise your Holy Name."

....this I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"LESSONS FROM LUKE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

St. Luke

I can hear it now, even though I myself was not present. I am exercising a bit of imagination, if you please. It was back a number of years ago, exceedingly precious, historically speaking, to this congregation -- when a group of people were banding together to constitute the first Lutheran parish on this side of the District Line, Northwest Washington. A man by the name of Bieber had come and spent several months recruiting people, laying before them a great challenge that they ought to be able to establish a base for the witnessing in the name of Jesus Christ.

Now was it late '39 or early 1940, be that as it may -- this group of people were going to have a congregational meeting. And as I imagine it, as the meeting was about to be called to order, it may have been Franklin Heindel.....it may have been Phil Krautwurst....it could have been Fred Ruth....it could have been Adam Messinger who raised the question: "What is the main item on the agenda tonight?

-- what is the major decision we may have to make that could affect the life of this congregation that we're about to organize?"

...and the reply could have come from Genevieve Dorothy Huiess -- "Well, as I understand it, we are to vote tonight on the name by which we will be known."

"What do you suppose it may be?" asked someone.

"Well, as I understand it, replied another, "We'll all have a chance -- we'll put our names together into a box, and then we'll draw them out and see which one gets the most votes."

It may have been Genevieve Huiess' mother who said, "It will probably be Saint Luke."

And another person said, "Why do you suppose that?"

"Well, that's the name Dr. Bieber wants."

The vote was taken.

I can tell you two things: it was the name that pleased him most, and to this day we're known as Saint Luke Congregation. Now in all fairness -- I'm trying to

project myself into the picture and wonder how I would have reacted had I been there then. I think I would have said, "Saint Luke -- that's not my choice. I would much prefer The Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Good Shepherd" . . . and in my mind's eye as I would be about to build my case, I'd step back and say, "But on second thought, I shall not press for it, and I think we are in duty bound to respect Dr. Bieber. Who more than he is qualified to advance a name?"

....for now we know that he went abroad throughout the United States and Canada establishing 60 to 70 parishes by the time he died -- and no one, no one could match his zeal and his conviction in those days. And I think he would have pressed very earnestly that his wish would have been respected

Tomorrow in the Calendar of the Church is Saint Luke Day. In this Festival Month of October, as you have already heard we're observing, celebratint this day-- our Name Day. We're in duty bound to pay attention to him, of course. What do you know about Saint Luke? In addition to all the information that you already have at hand, let me remind or re-inforce what you know:

- 1) -- he was not one of the Twelve, he was not an original disciple whom Jesus chose while He was here on earth. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you name them quickly, and you name them together, but only because they were Gospel writers.
- 2) -- he was not one of the Seventy
- 3) -- he was not a Jew, who had the benefit of the tradition of the faith.

This is what you need to remember, because as the sermon continues you'll see why these things are important -- he was not one of the Twelve...he was not one of the Seventy...he was not a Jew who had the benefit of the tradition.

Tradition has it that he was an artist, but that's highly legendary....

....he was an historian, of course he was

....he was a friend of the Apostle Paul

But more than anything else that I need to say to you now -- what he knew about Jesus Christ he did not receive first-hand from Jesus Christ in the sense that he walked by His side and lived with Him when Jesus was here on earth. Begin at this point, if you please: what he knew about Jesus Christ, he knew because someone else had told him. And when that someone had told him, that someone had told him so well that it made a dent upon the fabric of his soul.....so much so that he was compelled to tell other people what he had been told.

Oh, I should tell you this in case you don't know it: of all the writings in the New Testament, no person contributed more than did Luke. He has written more of the material that appears in the New Testament than any other person. And that in itself commands a measure of respect.

But now, why did he do it? This is very, very important. Why should any person want to tell somebody else about Jesus Christ? -- particularly in that day. We're told that in his day emperor worship was the thing, and they made much of it. Rumors spread rapidly that the emperors were divine. Luke could not tolerate this, and Luke being the kind of a person that he was, insisted on accurate information and fervently believed that people were in duty bound to have themselves informed in the most accurate and the most authentic way. So therefore on the basis of what he knew to be true, on the basis of what was passing through the crucible of his own soul -- mark the word and mark it well -- he was constrained to write, that others should be informed.

Now concentrate at this point for a moment. Did it ever occur to you that what you know about Jesus Christ you know because somebody else told you? You did not figure it out for yourself! Aside from what God reveals to you through the sacred writings, aside from what God sees fit to reveal to you through prayer and meditation, you can't possibly think of your knowledge of Jesus Christ without seeing at some time or another, in one way or another, another face, or to hear another voice. God gets His word to you through people. And when you think of St. Luke, think of the ones who told him -- and God be praised, who told him so well.

Indulge me for a moment. When I die and go to Heaven by the grace of God, I should like very much to meet her, my mind is as simple and as naive as all that. I should like to meet her -- a woman whose name I do not know, whose face I cannot recall. But I have been told when I was a youngster, along with my brothers and my sisters, she came to our house in that little village in north central Pennsylvania and said to my parents, "May I, please, take your children to Sunday School?" And what formal training I received in the Christian faith began at that point through that person, whose name I do not know, whose face I cannot recall. Say it again and again to yourself, what you know about Jesus Christ you know because God saw fit to transmit that information to you very largely through somebody else.

You and I sometimes sing that hymn, how we wish we could have been there then, when Jesus was here on earth. Well we weren't! But that does not deny us the opportunity of having been told, or being told about Jesus Christ. Say it ever so

often: what Luke knew about Jesus Christ he knew because somebody told him, and told him so well that he was constrained to pass it on to other people. He could not keep it to himself. He felt in duty bound to stand up and let others know.

When Winifred and I were on special assignment in behalf of the Church in Africa, I remember being in Liberia. And somebody told me something that I hope I may never forget. They told me that in a certain village in Liberia there was a person who claimed to have a cure for leprosy, the dread disease....but he refused to tell anyone the cure. He lived and died with his lips sealed. He knew it, but he kept it to himself. The lamentable thing could be that any number of you right now, in this very place, know the cure for sin.....but you keep it to yourself. You haven't told anyone else. Evidently it hasn't been wonderful enough for you to feel constrained to pass it on.

This sermon, by the way, bears the title: "Lessons From Luke" - - there are twin texts, both of them written by Paul: one in a letter to Christians who lived in Colossae, and the other, a second letter that he wrote to his younger friend Timothy. In the one text Paul simply refers to Luke as "the beloved physician." And in the second text he very poignantly refers to Luke: "Only Luke is with me . . . "

....which leads me to suggest, and this is conjecture, perhaps, and don't press me too hard -- but at the same time don't deny me the right to think it - - - it could have been Paul who introduced Luke to Jesus Christ.

In a certain sense, Luke has written two volumes -- the Gospel record that bears his name, and the book of the Acts of The Apostles, the mighty acts of God. And in those pages of the mighty acts of God you come eventually to some of the "We" passages, in which the author identifies himself with some of the people to whom he refers.....and the very first time that he uses the "We" passage is at Troas, and as I read that passage I also read that Paul had a noble ambition to do any number of things at that time for the Lord, and Paul's way of saying this -- that the Spirit saw otherwise.

Now indulge me for a moment. From the human perspective, I'm going to suggest that what happened may have been that that physical affliction kept him from going on and doing what he wanted to do, and at that particular time he happened to meet a physician by the name of Luke, and from that point on Luke stays with him. Tradition has it he remained a bachelor, and he lived to be 84 years of age. Paul only uses about a dozen words to refer to Luke in all of his writings. But whenever he refers to him, can't we detect that warmth, that high regard that he had for this one particular person, of whom he could say so poignantly, "Only Luke now is with me."

Paul referred to him as the 'good physician,' -- the 'beloved physician' -- and again and ever so often as Luke writes, you see the physician coming through. You'll undoubtedly have read that a lawyer, generally speaking, sees people at their worst. We get ourselves in a sweet mess, we rely on somebody to get us out of it, to plead our case.....a lawyer, so we're told, sees us at our worst.

...a pastor sees you at your best....

....but a physician sees you just as you are.

Luke, the physician, kept seeing people just as they are, and that's why when you read his Gospel in particular, he's always dealing so kindly, so compassionately, with sinners.

In this series of lessons that we can learn from Luke -- hear me and hear me well -- a curse upon us when we wax so judgmental! How often we keep ourselves from being effective agents of God's love because we're spending our energy lambasting people for the mess in which they've gotten themselves. I dread to think of what would happen if every time a physician sat with a patient in front of him, the patient would have a physician who would burn up his energy taking the patient to task for having violated all the rules of health, the fundamental rules of nutrition, for having abused his body.....and if that's all he got from his physician, a condemnation! But a good physician, seeing what he sees, disliking it as he may, begins at the point where the patient happens to be. Luke gives us that kind of a picture of Jesus Christ. To all intents and purposes, Luke, as a good physician, wants us to see Jesus Christ as the Good Physician, who begins with us where we are -- doesn't condemn us for not being where we ought to be, but looks upon Himself as the agent who can take us by the grace of God from where we are to where we ought to become. What a tremendous measure of satisfaction the physician knows when he sees improvement setting in for a patient.

I could go on again and ever so often telling you so many other lessons we can learn from Luke. But on this day so near our Name's Day -- let us see him properly, let us focus on him sharply and learn what we can.

I hasten to add, as this sermon is about to be concluded, that Luke's Gospel is the universal Gospel, in which he sees that the healing grace of Jesus Christ is meant for all people, and he plays that up magnificently.

As I am to walk away from this sacred desk I am reminded of the Bridge Over The River Kwai. Some of you may remember it. You may have seen the movie, you may have seen the television production of it -- the terrible things that happened, the building of the bridge and then the destruction of the bridge, which they deli-

berately have brought down upon themselves. And the solitary figure remains on the scene as the story ends. And who is the solitary figure? - it's the camp physician. For when men may do their worst, God still looks for an agent of healing and reconciliation.

In the Collect that Pastor David read for you on this day before the altar in this place, the prayer-of-prayers remains that as a people of God we should take to ourselves as a vocation the vocation of His servant Luke, the beloved physician. And this is what I covet for you as His people in God.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"A GOD TO PRAISE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Psalm 150:6

This weekend when our Department of Drama Ministry presented its two performances for this season, Roney Shawe, our Director, came out and made an announcement. She said that what we were about to experience was intended for us to think, and that's exactly what some of us did.

We found ourselves thinking in such thought patterns that we were not accustomed to think. As an example, the first of the two productions was entitled: "When God Comes To Breakfast You Don't Burn The Toast." God was portrayed by one of our members. That in itself was a shock, I suppose, but he did it exceptionally well.....

....as he crossed the threshold, the people in that household found themselves now engaged in a conversation with God. How do you talk to God when He sits down in front of you? How do you respond to Him when He stoops to your level? What kind of conversation do you have?....

We who were present could readily sense that it was an awkward thing to experience, and then in our awkwardness one of the characters said to God, feeling as though some kind of conversation had to be made -- "It's a beautiful day" . . . and then God of all people responded -- quickly, without any hesitation, one not to lose a chance to receive a compliment . . . "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" -- God said, "Thank you."

When it's all said and done, God doesn't get very many compliments. We're quick to blame Him, no question about that, but we're not always quick to praise Him, to acknowledge Him or to thank Him. Thanks to man's thoughtlessness, or thanks to man's arrogance, he's not quick to acknowledge the mercies that come from the hand of God.

I remember reading some time ago how in the legal profession, they document, or I should say they refer to these convulsions in nature, the disastrous things that happen, the ugly, the unfortunate, the unwarranted, from the human perspective -- the volcanic eruption, the earthquake, the tidal wave, which man himself presumably

did not cause, and which man himself cannot control, which man himself cannot head off so the legal language is, sanctimonious-sounding as it is -- "acts of God" -- as though: "God, you're to be blamed for these things."

Then do we assume that man takes credit for all the wonderful things that happen? Dare we permit ourselves to think that since the dawn of creation everything that's terrible that's happened -- "God, you're to blame! We're not." We're quick to take credit for the good, and the pleasant and the profitable....but for the lamentable, we point our finger at God and use pious-sounding phrases as this: "An Act of God."

As I stand among you now I must tell you that generally speaking, God does not loom as dominantly on the horizon as he once did for other generations. There was a time when people thought of God primarily, and they feared God. Macaulay, the historian, looks back to the time of the Puritans and said, "They feared nothing but God" -- and by that he meant they held Him in awe, and respect, and they recognized his sovereignty. When the historian of the future looks back upon our generation, he may have to say, "We feared everything but God." Joseph Wood Crutch, as he surveyed the scene, has concluded that God, not disappearing suddenly from the scene, has gradually receded, thanks to our efforts we've pushed Him farther and farther and farther away. And when that happens, people become fearful. When God remains predominant, people deal with faith and respond to Him and they trust Him for past mercies and for mercies yet to come. But when God is no longer there, and God is no longer in our thinking, then we become fearful creatures, honestly we do. And it could well be that when people look back upon our age, they may also refer to us as the "age of fear."

We are running scared, aren't we? Things are so uncertain, things are so unstable. This is the time of the terrorists -- whether he high-jacks an airplane, or laces a bottle of tylenol with cyanide....we're running scared....

...we make the places in which we live veritable fortresses, trying to insulate ourselves from the ugly thing that could happen....

It has happened! It's happening right now, somewhere. We're running scared, we are fearful, because we concentrate upon the untoward and the ugly and the unwarranted. And when we concentrate upon those things we are fearful.

Did I not read some time ago about a trustee in one of our great universities that was closely associated with the work on atomic energy. Now what did he think, dealing with atomic energy? -- this brand new thing that came to us not so long ago.

Well, let me recount for you a conversation that took place between this trustee of a leading university and a preacher friend.....as he reflected upon the destructive energies now put into the hands of men, this is what he said, and undoubtedly he speaks for millions of us: "As I review the history of the human race for the past 6,000 years, I can see no hope."

(I'm sorry that I have to share this with you --

I have to tell it to you just as he thought it)

" . . . As I review the history of the human race for the past 6,000 years, I can see no hope that man will deal any more wisely with this problem than he has with those that have arisen in the past. I cannot see even a glimmer of light on the horizon, so far as the survival of the human race is concerned."

.....this brilliant man fairly dripped with pessimism.....

His preacher friend, knowing him and knowing his views well, as preachers are wont to do, made bold to tell him -- I'll quote the preacher for you - -

"In your review of the possibilities of the future, you have left out the most important factor of all."

His friend, the trustee of the university, responded, almost defiantly, by asking,

"And what's that?"

"It is God," he was told by his preacher friend.

".....I cannot for one believe that the God who created man in His own likeness, endowing him with power, not only to unlock the secrets of the universe, but to hold fellowship with His creature, will now abandon man to self-destruction."

The trustee shook his head sadly and said, "You can say that, you can think that way. You have faith. I only have fear."

What is the opposite of faith? It isn't unfaith, it isn't non-faith. The opposite of faith is fear. When you can't trust and respond to someone you respect as being good, and great, and gracious, you run scared, you are afraid....

- - did it ever occur to you that you can't sing when you're afraid? The fearful have no songs. Only those possessed by faith can sing.....

In this world there's a remnant, I am happy to tell you, that can sing, and the test for this brief meditation on this day which is the Festival of Praise is from that portion of the sacred writings which aptly enough we refer to as the Book of Praise - - - there are 150 selections, and the last one is the 150th Psalm -- and

the 6th verse of that selection is this:

"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."

...and there is a remnant that does.

For there will always be those who will focus their eyes upon God and in the circumstances as such that surround them. You glue your eyes upon the mitigating circumstances that work for evil and you cannot help but become fearful.

William James, in his "Variety of Religious Experience" brings to out attention how Tolstoy, up to 50 years of age, was very uncomfortable with his life, he wasn't even sure of the goodness of God. He began to suffer one mood after another of despondency and despair -- so much so that he would deliberately hide rope, lest he use it to hang himself. but God be praised, Tolstoy went off by himself simply to think this thing through: did he or didn't he believe in God?

- - could he picture a world without God?

- - and when he pictured the fact of God and all that that represents, how did he feel?

...and then he discovered that every time he thought about God, there was a tremendous surge of spirit within his soul....and whenever he thought of a world without God, it was flat and drab, had no meaning..... "That's it!" said Tolstoy -- "This is it! This is what God does for me! He allows me to look upon life with meaning and with purpose" . . . and there was this surge in his soul.

There are those of us who find ourselves within the gathered company who cannot help but sing, because we concentrate upon Him who is our Lord and our Saviour. The believer goes magnificently on the principle that God does exist, that God has not abandoned His world, that God has not turned His back upon us....that God is always holding before us the prospect of Heaven.

I figured it out in my own mind, how it may be with you I don't know, but when do people sing the better? -- as they anticipate some good thing in the future, not yet theirs - - - ah, no! There's a brilliance of the song to the person who sings because he's already received. "I sing because I'm glad -- something's been given to me." It makes all the difference in the world. And Christians are people who remember constantly that the most wonderful thing that God could ever do He has already done! That's why we keep that cross on the altar -- to remind you -- the redemptive deed has been performed -- God did give His Son to die for us. We don't have to go to Hell! Heaven has not been taken away from us.

People who are afraid -- they don't sing. But people who know there's a God

who can be trusted, to whom you can respond by faith - - that, then, places on your lips the song of the redeemed.

"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord"
....our God is worth singing about. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE MEANING OF REFORMATION"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Throughout our married life Winifred and I have been privileged to live in three different parsonages, two of them here in Silver Spring, as you know, and then the one where we began our ministry together in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Let me tell you a little bit about that one.

It was built at the turn of the century, thanks to the influence and the motivation of my predecessor, built in 1902, it was Victorian style. It was built by volunteer labor. The only person they paid was the foreman, and he got two dollars a day. The total cash outlay for the structure, this five-bedroom house, was \$800.

....downstairs it had a number of rooms, a living room and a parlor, both of equal size. And as any of you knows, back in those days, in the Victorian period, horsehair furniture in the parlor....drawn shades -- and as one wit observed --
"used only for a funeral, or a visit from the preacher, or some equally painful occasion....."

But specifically now, the porch. It wrapped around the house. There was a porch on the street side, there was a porch on the alley side, with its railing, and the bannisters painted white. It was freshly painted for the new preacher and his bride, and we were quite excited when we walked into it and established our residence there. Every time we went up on the porch, the gleaming white bannister... ..but....winter came, and then spring. And we soon discovered we had an annual spring ritual on our hands.

Not far from where we lived was the Pennsylvania Railroad, with its coal-fired engines, belching smoke into the heavens.....also, not far away, Herr's Dairy. It needed scalding hot water for its sanitizing processes -- coal-fired burners.... ..and all the soot that went up into the heavens provided no kind of preferential treatment for the parsonage. So when Springtime came and we anticipated summer use of the porch -- there was the annual Springtime ritual -- the railing, the bannisters had to be scrubbed. They never stayed white . . . and frequently, of course, had to be painted.

Now why do I tell you this? - - they never stayed white -- they always had to be re-furbished or repainted? That's what Reformation is. And on this day as I stand at the sacred desk, if it's a title that you want for the sermon, listen carefully -- it will not be "The Meaning Of The Reformation" - - but rather: "THE MEANING OF REFORMATION" - - you drop the THE - - "The Meaning of Reformation" because properly understood, reformation is an ongoing process. Nothing ever stays won. Again and ever so often the pristine touch has to be restored and renewed. A proper characterization for the Christian Church is reformation and renewal.

I suppose that's one reason, quite frankly now, and don't misunderstand me, I haven't asked for the trumpets to be sounded and I haven't done a great deal of shouting and yelling about the new Church that's going to be established----the re-structuring, important as it may be, and wonderful as it may be -- because for this reason: we dare never throw all of our emphases into simply re-structuring a thing. What is basic to the Church is renewal, and we daren't confuse re-structuring for renewal. And again and ever so often as I come to this sacred desk I will always be in duty bound to remind you that reformation and renewal is an on-going process.

Let me take you behind the scenes for a moment and, not to speak crassly, but to give you some secrets of the trade. We pastors receive frequently invitations to subscribe to a sermon service. There is some fellow who makes perfectly good money supplying sermons for preachers who can't very well supply their own sermons and can't prepare them. And every now and then we get an advertisement for some gimmick for some pastor to use, to re-vitalize the life of his parish, to add a little pizzazz to the service, if you want to use that jargon....

....well let me hasten to say to you that your pastors here in Saint Luke have never subscribed to a sermon service, nor do we subscribe to the use of gimmickry, as you well know.....

But I do remember getting an advertisement for a pageant to be used at Reformation time that would introduce the people to the service that would follow. The pageant was entitled: "Hammer-Blows That Shook The World" and the fellow who offered that pageant would have it develop in this manner: wherever it would be used, the congregation would be advised beforehand that when they came to church they would not go directly to the nave. They would gather outside -- as an example here, on a day such as this, had you come and had we used that formula today....

....we would have met on the Highland Drive side of the church, we would have gathered outside. And then at a

particular moment you would have been surprised if we would have had a Frank Gatchell dressed up like Martin Luther -- Charlotte would have prepared an outfit for him resembling Martin Luther.....and then to remind us of what happened on October 31, 1517, Frank with somewhat of a flourish would have gone to the Red Doors and pasted there his Ninety-Five Theses, as they are referred to historically -- these ninety-five things that the Friar of Wittenburg, the good professor of the university there, wanted to discuss regarding the church that he loved in his earnest attempt to reform it and to renew it.....and then having done that, Frank would have walked away, and then we would have sung, with all the enthusiasm we could muster, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" -- to remind us in this dramatic way that that's the way it was -- October 31, 1517, at the door of the Castle Church, or All Saints' Church, in the German village of Wittenburg.....

Two reasons why we haven't done it.

One, we don't subscribe to gimmickry here at Saint Luke.

And secondly, I would have shied away from it primarily because of the faulty interpretation that you might have had, that you would have allowed yourself to believe that that was the moment of reformation in the life of the Church, as though there had never been any reformation before, and as though there were not an ongoing movement that followed.

Now the thrust of this sermon is precisely this: reformation is an ongoing thing, it's essential to the life of the church. Nothing ever stays won, to use that figure of speech.

You may not have thought of it, in a certain sense Jesus Christ was The Reformer. You can begin at that point. There are some historians and some Bible scholars who say that He really didn't introduce any new preaching -- well that may jolt you a bit -- what was distinctive? As the Scriptures record it: "He preached with authority, and not as the scribes. There was a freshness, there was a vitality, there was the identification of the preacher with the preachment, the messenger with the message. And when He did introduce that grand and glorious concept of love, as the world had never known it before, we remember it not because of

what He said about it, but the way He proved His point by sacrificing His life, by demonstrating His love.

"Greater love has no man than this, that
a man lay down his life for his friend."

....so Jesus Christ -- see Him then as the Reformer -- who to all intents and purposes tackled the established church in His day and took the hierarchy to task, because they were violating the basic tenets of the Kingdom.

The Church was established. That man Paul went around from place to place establishing congregations, and no sooner had he done that than what would he have to do? -- he had to write a series of letters, directives, providing them constructive criticism, calling them back -- even though they were comparatively new, to what the church was meant to be, and to do, lest they stray from the intention that God has in mind for His church.

One century leads to another, and then we come to that extraordinary period, as historians like to think of it, the 16th Century, where you have Martin Luther, then, and all the others, calling the Church to renewal as they attempt to reform it. As I read what has been written about the early Christian Church, the text that gripped me and that serves as the basis for all that you are hearing now is in the 17th chapter of the Book of Acts. It tells about the Christians who lived in Berea, and this grand and glorious thing was said about them: They studied, they searched the Scriptures, to make certain that what was happening in the life of their church was true. And that's the purpose to be served by the reformer -- to always raise the question: What we're doing -- is this true to what God had in mind? And are we going about it in the right way?

Aulen

Gustav Alaiⁿ, the great Swedish theologian, maintained that "Any Christian congregation has no right to direct its energies toward anything unless it advances the Kingdom of God" . . . and every now and then you and I have to ask ourselves that question. Here in Saint Luke Church, the energies that we direct, are we dissipating them? -- or making them count for good as we advance the cause of the Kingdom? And how can you be sure that that's being done?

You cannot think of any reformer unless you think of him as the-man-with-the-book. And by the way, quite parenthetically, who was it who said that all history essentially is biographical? -- which means at every critical point you'll see a person. And for our purpose this morning I am going to suggest that he's always a person with a book.....

-- even Jesus Christ, when He began His ministry, went to
Nazareth, His home town, and began His ministry with the Book

in front of Him -- "Today I say to you, that what I've just read . . . " -- as He launched His personal program....

...Jesus Christ, the Man-with-the-Book.

-- the Apostle Paul -- you can't think of him aside from the books that he's written....

-- Karl Marx -- at a critical period in history -- you can't think of Karl Marx aside from his "Das Kapital" . . .

-- and I'm in duty bound to tell you, even Adolph Hitler, who in our lifetime, a figure not to be ignored, who left his lengthened shadow of destruction across the whole face of Europe -- you can't even think of him without his book "Mein Kampf" . . .

-- Martin Luther, the reformer who comes first to our minds, with his book -- the Scriptures, his catechism....and you ought to be aware of it -- he's the father of congregational singing. He put the Reformation movement and message to song....

How can we be sure that we're being true as we root and ground ourselves in the Book? The Bereans read the Scriptures with that thought in mind, to make certain that what they were doing was true according to the Scriptures, according to what they had been taught. And above all else, Martin Luther and the blessed Reformers maintained that it must be according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ -- the exaltation of the personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour -- and this must always be paramount.

Very shortly we will be receiving another group of new members in Saint Luke. How fortunate we are that this is an ongoing thing in our life and spirit. And every time a New Members' Group is formed, it begins in the same way, with this announcement: "We have no interest in talking to you about membership in Saint Luke Church if it's simply a case of having your membership transferred from one denomination to another. Our primary concern is that when you become a member of this congregation, your relationship to Jesus Christ is deepened!" and that's the acid test: How does this bring me closer to Jesus Christ, my personal Saviour?

I've never failed to be thrilled when I've gone to St. Peter's in Rome, in my judgment the most magnificent church in Christendom. But I have a sobering thought when I remember John Tetzel, the rascal, wearing a priest's garb that he did, he was off-base. He went around the German countryside gathering funds to build St. Peter's in Rome, and that in itself is good! Churches need to be built. I am a firm believer in cathedrals. I rejoice in the cathedral of St. John The Divine,

....for a while, you see, caught up with all the social activism, they said, "We will build no more to this cathedral....we'll invest our time and energy in meeting the need of the poor around us" - - and that too is true. But the man who feeds the poor needs to be built up and nurtured and inspired. And cathedrals have a way of lifting up the soul. It's a gratifying thing to know that St. John The Divine is now renewing its interest in building a cathedral...

...but that John Tetzels, he was off-base when he went around gathering funds, he forgot the primary thing. He encouraged people to give money and allowed them to believe that by the giving of their money they would be guaranteed passage to Heaven. They even had a little jingle:

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul out of purgatory's fire springs"

That's not good theology, that's not true to the Christian faith. We are saved because of our faith in Jesus Christ, and then as a result of our awareness and of the assurance of our salvation - - then we do these things! - - I become a good person because God through Jesus Christ has made me good. Then my deeds follow.

As I stand at this sacred desk on this day, I am in duty bound to remind you then, that Reformation is not something that happened just at one period in the history of the Church, and the books were closed. Let me say it again and ever so often: Nothing ever stays won. Reformation is an ongoing thing, just as renewal is an ongoing thing. And may that become increasingly true in the life of this particular parish. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE KINGDOM OF GOD - NOW"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

And 23:43

At the very beginning of this sermon allow me to say to you two things. One, I would be less than honest if I did not tell you that this Sunday in the calendar of the Church -- Christ The King Sunday -- is one of my favorite days within the entire calendar of the Church.

And the second thing is to make two references to several Popes of the Roman Catholic Church.

- - the first reference is to the highly regarded and warmly beloved Pope John 23rd. He was so God-like in his being human. As an example: in the first Christmas of his papacy he left his very fine residence in the Vatican and went to visit a jail in Rome . . . for, said he, as he greeted one prisoner after another, "You could not come to me, so I have come to you" ...so God-like in his being so very human.

- - and then this reference, if you don't mind. Imagine the Pope, now, and somebody asks the question: "How many people work here in the Vatican?"and then his Eminence replied, as though he were calculating, and then the trace of a twinkle comes into his eye - - "How many people work here? - - oh, I'd say about half of them." - - so God-like in being so very, very human. And being able to be humorous is a cherished characteristic of being human.....

Or as an example, when he was told he had cancer, and his days were being numbered, did he go to his desk and write a very pious prayer, which hopefully Christians in years yet to come would recall and mouth as their very own prayer in their time of affliction? Not at all. But what did they find on his desk as he contemplated this final step in his journey? - - "My bags are packed" . . . so God-like in his being so very human.

And this exceedingly precious trait in this man called to follow in the footsteps of Peter was expressed so magnificently when he opened the windows to allow fresh air to flow freely and fully within the Vatican and outside, as in a very

gracious gesture he said, "We do well to talk with one another and to think with one another . . . " And Christians of traditions began to do that, thanks to the influence of this one man, so God-like in his being human....

...it's so human for brothers and sisters to get together, it's so human for them to think and to talk together, and when they did that -- thanks to him -- they began to concern themselves with the things that they had in common.....and some of them discovered and re-discovered the Church Year - - - thanks to the good Pope John 23rd.

Now the other Pope that I recall in my lifetime goes back to 1925 -- Pope Pius XI. He was there, you see, surveying a shattered, broken, bleeding, bruised world after the Great War. World War I had run its course and now the nations of Europe in particular were confronted with re-building the world. And it was Pope Pius XI who said, "You will re-build in vain if you build with no reference at all to the Lordship of Jesus Christ." He issued a proclamation striking that very theme - - "Let the world be reconstructed on the basis of the Kingdom of God, and if that should not be done, our efforts will not count for anything -- at least not much."

...wise man that he was, he said, "It is not enough to issue a proclamation - - we will write it into the Calendar of the Church!"

....and that's how we got Christ The King Sunday. And that's why here in Saint Luke we're celebrating this last Sunday in the Church Year, recognizing the sovereignty of God.

The cycle's been completed and now we look back and ask ourselves:

-- what have we made of it?

-- have we given Him the obeisance He deserves? - have we lived as subjects of the Kingdom that's eternal?

-- have we ordered the days of our years as subjects of Him who is King above all kings and a Lord beyond which there is none other lord?

One of the most beautiful of all of our banners is the banner especially designed for today, to recognize Jesus Christ as King.

There is a text for this sermon, of course there is - the 43rd verse of the

23rd chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Two people are involved. For both of them time is limited. Each of them in turn will be ending his earthly journey. The one -- the dying thief . . . and the One to whom he addresses his words -- the Prince of Life, to whom we now reverently refer as King above all kings. . . .

"Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

....and Jesus replies, "Today, I say to you, you shall be in Paradise."

I am by nature an optimist, and I say very quickly to you, I am a brooding optimist. I am somewhat pessimistic about today and tomorrow . . . but as a Christian I dare not be pessimistic. Which leads me to tell you, I am optimistic, then, about the day-after-tomorrow. But from my vantage-point of 42 years in the ministry as I survey the human scene, I am constrained to say to you now, that this world is very much like a dying thief.

That thief, you see, had lived at the expense of other people. He had exploited his relationship with his fellow-man. The world is like a dying thief. We, too, have been living at the expense of other people...

...we, too, have been exploiting a relationship....very honestly, we have been funding one effort after another at the expense of other people...

...we have been creating obligations, exploiting our relationships with unborn generations, and living at their expense..... you can't read it any other way.

And I'm inclined to think that the environmentalists cannot be ignored. We have been exploiting our natural resources, giving little heed to the price that may have to be paid by those who come after us. The world is like a dying thief. We have been living at the expense of other people.

And hear me and hear me well, when I say to you, we in the Church, to all intents and purposes, sometimes have been as a dying thief because we have been living at the expense of other people, we have been drawing upon the religious capital of our parents. And it could well be that we have not made enough investment in the future as we've drawn so heavily upon what we have been given and have concerned ourselves all too little with the nurturing of our own faith as it's crystallized through experience itself. Again and ever so often we have been relying heavily upon the faith of a father and of a mother and of a grandparent....and I'm not so sure that our grandchildren will be that fortunate because we have been living at the expense of others. Which is simply to say again and repeatedly so,

the world is like a dying thief -- exploiting its relationships.

Robert (Heilbrunner) in his perceptive manner, wrote a few years ago his book "An Inquiry Into The Human Prospect," how can we read the future of man? What lies in store for us?....I read it searchingly and very carefully. I did not like what I read. He is not optimistic as this preacher is -- he is pessimistic to the core. And in his final chapter as he thinks in terms of what is yet to come, he deals with the question: Is there hope for man? . . . and his answer is: almost an unqualified NO -- except for the fact that he does make an allowance that there could be some catastrophic event.....which is simply to say that maybe God will wipe the slate clean and we begin all over again.

Let me read for you what I treasure, the words of J.B. Phillips in his little book entitled "Is God At Home?" -- who strikes this very theme:

"Time marches on, and what is eventually going to happen? Well, most scientists agree that the life of the human race on the planet can only be for a limited time, perhaps a few million years. After that, the sun's vast energy will have been exhausted so much that life can no longer be sustained on this planet. It will not, of course, happen suddenly, but ultimately the world will become as cold and as airless and as dead as the moon.

This means that supposing the marvelous progress of the human race really does take place, and future generations are incredibly healthy, wealthy and wise, yet the end will be silence -- cold and dead. Think of it! The whole process which has lasted millions of years, the whole sum of human struggles, endeavors, hopes and fears, will end in the deathly cold of inter-stellar space. What a prospect, what an ideal for which to live, and to work, to die!

The Christian religion, of course, has always taught something quite different! According to its founder, Jesus Christ, this life is only a temporary and limited preface to real Life, that is sharing the life of God beyond the limitations of time and space. The Christian while he lives in this world does his best to make it better, to relieve suffering, to right wrongs, to spread happiness and the joy that he's discovered in his knowledge of God's redeeming love . . . "

Our Blessed Lord said, "Today you shall be with me in Paradise" -- and a free and reckless translation of that is simply this: Today you can have a bit of Heaven -- today earth can reflect Heaven itself -- today you can be part of it! -- today Heaven claims you. This is what Christians believe. You don't have to

die to enjoy a bit of Heaven. As soon as you enter the Kingdom the joy of Eternal Life becomes fully operative and effective in your life. When Jesus Christ was here on earth He spent so much of His time going around from place to place and encountering person by person, telling about the Kingdom of God -- you can enter it today. The Kingdom of God is within you! In Heaven's name, when we think of God and all of His goodness, we think of it as something that's yet to happen! -- as though God has this carrot in front of us -- later on -- later on the wonderful thing will take place....

...today, says our Blessed Lord, it can happen.

At the first service this morning my soul was strangely stirred when Pastor David stood at the altar and asked God's richest blessing upon every pledge card that's being placed there. It will happen at the conclusion of this service. And I said to myself as this was occurring, it's happening now -- every time a person puts a pledge card on the altar of the Lord he's saying, "I'm part of the Kingdom now -- today I am seeing that the hungry are being fed....today I'm seeing that the ill-clad are being clothed....today I am guaranteeing that those without hope will receive the Good News of Jesus Christ....

-- today Heaven is being guaranteed

-- today we're part of the Kingdom!.. . "

What do we say here in Saint Luke? We don't talk about our work, we talk about the work of the Kingdom -- in the present tense. And God wants us to enjoy it, and to share in it -- today.

We used to have a dear soul who came to this church -- she never quite affiliated for reasons that seemed important to her as she clung tenaciously to her membership in Europe....but God bless her, she was a very vital kind of person, the kind of a person to whom if you said, "You must come to our house sometime for dinner" -- she would say, "When?" God waits. God longs for that kind of a response on our part when He says to us: "I offer you the Kingdom!"

....and He's waiting for us to say -- "When?"

Jesus Christ is saying -- - "Now -- today -- it is yours!"

This I most certainly believe.

* * * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NOT SOMETHING BUT SOMEONE"
(Luke 21:28)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen

I would covet for each of you a deepening of your life spiritually as we pass from Sunday through Sunday in this Advent-tide. My heart's prayer for each of you would be that this could be for us in Saint Luke the best Advent-tide ever. This is the first in the series of sermons to be preached in these four Sundays in Advent upon the general theme: Advent Means Someone's Coming.

Researchers do all kinds of things for us these days. Listen now as I tell you very quickly about this very unusual experiment. How they were able to do the research itself, the details of it, I can't quite tell you. But I do know that in a certain village an experiment was conducted upon the people who worked in a particular plant....

....now they all did the same kind of work, they all went to work at the same time, and they all left when the whistle blew at the close of the day. They all worked in the same conditions and circumstances, and for the most part those for whom the research was being done received the same remuneration....

What did the researchers discover? - - that when the day's work was done, a certain number of those people who worked in that plant left work behind them, seemingly, for want of a better way of telling you, with a spring in their step, a light in their eyes.....and I suppose a song upon their lips. Their energies had not been completely depleted, and they had enough energy to look forward to what was going to happen next - - ah, that made the difference!

....because there were those who left work at the close of the day, apparently were dragging their feet and their heads were down-cast.....

And the researchers discovered that the difference was simply this: some of them had something to look forward to -- a dinner with friends...a particular activity

that they would thoroughly enjoy -- they were the ones who left, after the day's work had taxed their energy, nonetheless they left with a spring in their step, and a glow upon their faces.....those who had nothing to look forward to were the ones, the researchers said, who left dragging their feet.

Did it ever occur to you, my good friend, that you and I to all intents and purposes live and become according to the things that we expect? Your demeanor and my demeanor is determined very largely by the things we anticipate. Let me find myself in your company and the telephone rings, and if you're expecting someone to call you, it makes all the difference in the world -- in you.

-- let me be close at hand when the mail is being delivered,
and if you're expecting one letter in particular from someone
special, it makes all the difference -- in you.

We live by the things that we expect, we live by the wonderful things that we anticipate.

She was not a member of the parish I was privileged to serve at the time. She lived two blocks away from the church in one of those mansions in town, an exceptionally well-built house, and her husband had been a well-known physician in the community. I stopped by just to make a friendly visit one day -- this was a number of years ago. What do I recall from that visit?

Among other things she told me, this woman who was up in years -- oh, I should add, reminiscent of the day when housewives invariably wore an apron around the house -- she took it off as she answered the door to receive me as her visitor, and put the apron up in its accustomed place. And then I saw her reach into the pocket, and I said, "Why are you doing that?" . . . and she smiled and she said, "Maybe you'd like to know. My mother always taught me to keep something extra in that pocket -- for the beggar who might come to the door."

....we lived in a community, you see, when there were hard
times, and beggars were very, very common, especially when
they came from the railroad tracks not very far away....

And she also said to me, "While I look forward to the possibility of someone knocking at the door . . . " (she was this kind of person, now, who just spilled over so easily -- she gave me this very unusual bit of information) . . . "While I expect someone eventually to knock at the door, you know what, Pastor? -- I'm living for the day when I'll hear my Lord Jesus knocking at the door of my heart and He'll usher me into Heaven . . . and I'm living for that day because I want to see Him face to face, and I want to see the face of my beloved ones who are in Heaven . . . "

....there was a day when people talked like that. There was a day when people thought like that. And I dare say they were the better because of it. Happy indeed is that person who anticipates the glorious day of the Lord's appearing and re-appearing.

Visser T'hooft(?) the great leader of world Christendom, once said sadly that the most lamentable thing that he could say about their generation was this: that we were a people for whom Hell had no terror and Heaven offered no anticipation, no invitation, no great expectation. But basically speaking and properly understood, Christians of all people are meant to be the people of the Forward-Look -- looking at that which is yet to come, realizing that that which is yet to come will be exceedingly wonderful. For in the future there is always God...with God there is always something better yet to come. Advent means coming. But it doesn't just mean coming. From the Christian perspective it means God is coming. Someone's coming -- someone special is coming.

I know I have my moments when with you I hang my head, I wring my hands, I have a dismal tone in my voice when I talk about what the world has come to. Would you believe it that whenever I anticipate coming to this sacred desk, there is a kind of surge within my soul because I know that when I stand at this desk I do not think in terms of what the world has come to . . . but I think sublimely in terms of what is coming to the world! God has not abandoned us, God has not forsaken us. That's the basic theme of Advent -- Someone's coming, Someone special -- God Himself.

The world is constantly looking for something new and different to help us out of the mess. We pay perfectly good money to people who go off to 'think-tanks' that they might come up with some new program, with some new philosophy, with some new principle...

- the world doesn't especially need some new program
- the world doesn't especially need some new platform
- and the world doesn't especially need some new principle....

What the world needs is to discover all over again a personal relationship with God. Once we realize how God has established that personal relationship with us in Jesus Christ, then we may discover all over again, if not for the first time, how we're meant to have a personal relationship with our fellow-man, where it's really spelled out, and where the action genuinely counts.

What is the meaning of the Christian experience if it isn't to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ? The more ardent becomes my desire to be remem-

bered as a person who always wanted to talk to you about Jesus Christ -- He's coming, and He's coming your way. Your name is on His calling list, and eventually in one way or another He'll engage you in a kind of an encounter. And until it happens, the most wonderful thing yet to experience in your life is awaiting you!

In company with many of you, I too recall the day when someone distinguished came to see us, and some extraordinary person crossed the threshold of our home and graced it with his presence. We remember where the person sat...we remember what the person said....we remember that we really wanted to be a little bit better than we were. And every now and then that person made God exceedingly precious for us. Someone once describing this planet said, "Of all the planets, we're the blessed ones, because we're the visited planet!" -- for God Himself saw fit to come and to dwell with us.

Advent means coming. From the Christian perspective it means someone special is coming. And that someone special is God. Will you live this day with an expectant mood? -- and let the difference set in? This I most certainly believe will happen.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ONE DAY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Acts 1:10-11

Allow me to make this sermon as simple, as plain, as unsophisticated as possible. It bears the title "One Day" and the text is from the Book of the Acts of The Apostles, the first chapter, 10th and 11th verses, a portion of which reads as follows:

"This same Jesus that you see ascending up
into heaven shall one day come again in
great glory."

As I stand at the sacred desk this morning my mind goes back across the years to that small town in which I grew up....

- on the one corner there was Weaver's Velvet Brand
Ice Cream
- opposite that, the new bank came to town, the People's
Bank and Trust Company
- the corner directly opposite it was the Methodist Church
- and then up half a block away, on the other side by an
alley was the Lutheran Church.

Every now and then some of us who were accustomed to going to the Lutheran Church would leave Luther League and then go over with my best friend, whose father happened to have been the preacher in the Methodist Church....

...we were fascinated by what he did for us, or better still, I suppose the more correct word would be, we were entertained. He had a way of relating to us who were young, and in addition to the prepared sermon he would always introduce at some point in the service something especially geared for our thinking.... He was a clever chap, and he knew it! - - that seemed to spoil it now that I've gotten older - - he'd tell one anecdote, but never quite complete it...and then he'd say, "Now next Sunday I'll tell you the rest of it." . . . and then next Sunday the same thing --- "I'll tell you the rest of it."

I look back upon that experience and brand it now as being something less than what it should have been.

Now my pastor, upon whom I looked with affection and esteem also, even as I did preacher Heims - - when he preached I never quite understood some of the things he would say, but he left an indelible mark upon the fabric of my soul that gave me to understand that what he was dealing with were holy thoughts. And he, more than any other person at that time in my life, introduced me to the awe and the majesty of God, and the transcendental aspect that must always be a part of our worship experience.

Preacher Heims, bless his soul, he talked about a God who was very chummy, and in the long run chumminess doesn't do too much for you. But my preacher -- he introduced me to a God - high and lifted up, worthy to be feared, worthy to be respected. And in the long run, that has lasting value. A God who can get too close may not serve you well when you fraternize with deity.

But having said all of that (thank you for indulging me)...I must also tell you that I never remembered too much about the sermons that preacher Heims preached....but I do remember that when I would sit there in that Methodist church, there was a heroic-sized painting of Jesus Christ that dominated the front of the church. It was above the Communion table...and I would sit there. And to this very day, and hopefully to the day that I die, I'll recall that painting, that pictorial interpretation of Jesus Christ. There He was, with hands outstretched, with a long flowing garment....and there was a time when I could never figure out whether He was coming or going....but then I was told in no uncertain way by my Sunday School teacher that that was a picture of the Ascension. Jesus had just met with His disciples for the last time, spoken some words to them, given the Great Command, and then He disappeared out of their sight.....

...but then she said, "Raymond, here it is in the Bible. It's in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles - - this is the way it reads: 'This same Jesus will one day come again in great glory.'"

Now as this sermon continues to unfold on this, the Second Sunday in Advent, reminding us again and ever so often that we Christians are the people of the forward look - you're anticipating some good thing yet to come -- we need to remind ourselves that one day it will happen.

In that same small town...(I am sorry to have to tell you this) ...apparently there would be a division among some people who were very religious. We had one group in particular, as I remember it, who allowed themselves to believe and to think that they could name the precise day and the precise time

when Jesus Christ was going to come again.

Now there's nothing unusual about that because as I remember when I was taught when I was going to school about religion here in America, every now and then a group would appear on the scene who would get together, as though they had inside information -- this was going to be the day, this was going to be the time, this was going to be the place....and of course one episode after another led to one disappointment after another -- Jesus just didn't accommodate them . . . but they were so sure of it! And they became very impatient with other people who did not think as they did.

There has been division among religious groups, at this very, very point, and it is an unfortunate thing, because the question is asked -- you ask it -- it's been asked even by disciples in the day of our Blessed Lord -- "When will you come?....when?....when?....when? There is only one answer to that question: we don't know. That's what Jesus said to His disciples who asked it of Him: He even went so far as to say, "Why not even the angels in heaven are made privy to this information."

But honestly now, why are we humans so foolish? Why should anyone spend his time and his energy trying to figure out the precise time when Jesus said, "It's futile -- I'm not going to tell you." That really isn't the question, When will He come again? It's enough for us to know that He will! And the Scriptures remind us of this. He will come again! He will....He will....He will return! -- and we recite it in our Creeds.

It's enough for us to be assured that God is an honorable God who keeps His promises. And that should give us a measure of assurance and a measure of peace. It ought not to disturb us by trying to figure out when it's going to happen. The question that ought to be asked is this: when He comes, will I be ready? -- will I be prepared?

There are two groups of people. There are always folks who are dividing people into categories and say that there are only two groups. Let me give you a listing of them -- you could form your own list:

rich.....poor
liberal.....conservative
good.....bad
saved.....unsaved
ready.....or not ready

...the line is drawn. Eventually -- even Jesus Christ asked us to think in those terms.

Years ago when we followed a particular pericope, that is appointed Lessons to be read on a certain Sunday in the course of the year, the Gospel Lesson as I remember it to be read on the Sunday next before Advent -- the last Sunday in the Church Year before we introduced Christ The King festival, had to deal with a story that Jesus told -- drew a line...and when the time came for the festivities to begin, and the merriment to be put in order, a certain number of them -- half of them -- were denied entrance, because as you may remember, the story that Jesus told -- they simply were not ready, they were unprepared!

Now it doesn't make much difference whether it was 50% or not, whether it is 70% and 30%...60% and 40%....80% and 20% -- Jesus says a line will be drawn -- ready, or not.

Didn't we play a game when we were kids -- a hide-and-seek game -- where the person who was It would go and stand alongside a tree and not look around at all the other people who were involved in the game, and when he finally ended after he counted so many numbers: "Coming -- ready or not!"

...coming, ready or not. There is no question about the return of our Blessed Lord. He will come -- whether we are ready or not.

So the question remains, my friend. Will we be made aware of His nearness when He comes? Will we know that He is at hand? And will we receive the favorable look from His face? That's where we need to anchor our thinking.

I am absolutely convinced that the quality of your life and the quality of my life could be changed if we lived out the days of our years in anticipation of this good thing to come. Do you remember the thrust of last Sunday's sermon? -- you and I become according to the things that we anticipate. Isn't there that song, that popular song, that's left a dent in the fabric of my mind, "One day my prince shall come" -- one day -- and then will I be ready? That's the question. How shall I be ready? What ought I be doing in the meantime?

Alvin Rogness, that prince of preachers of the American Lutheran Church, who one day graced this pulpit, dealt with this very theme, as I recall it, and used a very handsome illustration. He pictured two people standing on the platform of a station waiting for the arrival of a friend, and neither one of the people could agree as to which train he would take -- whether he would arrive at two o'clock in the afternoon or four o'clock in the afternoon -- they were there, they knew he was coming....but as they waited on the platform they argued, the one was so cock-sure that he'd come at two o'clock...and the other was building

his case, he would come at four o'clock. And Rogness says all the time they were arguing, they denied themselves the joy of anticipation and denied themselves a fruitful time by which they could have been better occupied to do other things. So it is with Jesus Christ upon the time of His returning. Happy indeed is that person who anticipates the return of Jesus Christ, who in the meantime is kept busy doing the things that will please God.

I should be very happy indeed if you would smile broadly as I relate this story that one of you told me, about an old Catholic priest and a young Catholic priest. And one day the young Catholic priest came to the old one and said, "Guess what! God is here, in our church! -- right now!"

...the old priest shook his head and said, "You have been working too hard. He can't be." And the young priest says, "But He is! Come! Look!"....and the old priest accommodated him, and as he stood in the back of the nave and he looked forward -- sure as not, there was God in the third seat from the front on the right-hand side! . . . and the young priest said, "What do we do now?"...and the old priest said, "I don't know about you, but I'm going to look busy!"

....and the point is exceptionally well taken - busy, of course, doing the things that will be pleasing in God's sight! He will come again. Will you be ready - to greet Him?

Let me share this very simple home-spun illustration with you. One of the most virtuous women I have ever known was brought up in the old way. I remember her from her teenage years. She would find herself asking the question: Dare I do this? Dare I go to this place? Will the place or the event that will claim my time and attention be the kind of thing that I'd be very comfortable in if Jesus Christ were to return and find me there? You may smile broadly, my friend, at anyone brought up in that kind of a way, but there is much to be said for it.

How ashamed and embarrassed we are sometimes when we're caught off-guard, when someone we respect finds us dropping an unhandsome word or thinking a guilty thought. Blessed indeed is that person who can order the days of his years in such a manner that no matter when his Lord may appear on the scene, he may from the human perspective be unashamed.

And the other side of the coin is this: as far as God is concerned, whenever He appears, it's always going to be in glory - - it's a glorious experience. And that's why we need to deal in terms with the awe and the majesty and the transcendent quality of God! It's so sublime, and so chaste. I can't recall the novel, nor can I recall the name of the novelist, but I do remember he deals with a character who in the days of his youth misspent his life. But then one day, the chaste, and the good, and the beautiful came into his life...and they were married. But by his own admission, he was never able to appreciate to the full all that she brought to him, because he offered her a life that had never been fully prepared for something as good as she was.

That's why when I have the opportunity I plead with those who are young to remain chaste, and as pure as possible. That's the damnable thing, you see, about pre-marital sex, and promiscuity. It cheapens. And who knows but one day the good, and the pure, and the god-like could be made available to you....and you'd be less than ready. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WHERE GOD IS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

John 1:26

First the title for the sermon: "Where God Is," and the text, the 26th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"There stands among you a man you do not know."

Whether he thought he could get away with it or not, I cannot tell you, but he did begin his sermon in a very shocking way. He was accustomed to doing that, as today's Gospel Lesson, read so well by Dr. Holcomb, indicated. Perhaps you were alert as that passage of Scripture was being read - - "You generation of vipers!" - - no preacher is ever encouraged to begin in such a manner, to speak in so derogatory manner regarding the people that he's addressing. But John the Baptist did.

But John the Baptist was no ordinary preacher. He was entirely different, he was a different kind of person, and he was a different kind of preacher. Shock his congregation? -- of course he did. And that's why presumably he wasn't surprised when at the conclusion of the sermon a delegation tarried, as though they wanted to make perfectly plain to him, "You can't get away with it. We would like a little bit of your time, there are some things we'd like to discuss with you - - "
...and that's exactly what they did.

But the longer they talked, undoubtedly the more the preacher was troubled by the fact that their greater concern wasn't so much with what was said, as they were taking issue with the preacher himself. Now Marshall McLoen used to say, the medium is the message, which in this case would be the messenger is the message - - - John says, "Not so! -- Don't you worry about me! Don't get hung up about my manner or my mood or my presentation. Your responsibility is to pay attention to what I was talking about!" . . . then I suppose he gave it to them all over again, when in no uncertain manner he said, "I have been talking to you about Jesus Christ."

It's a very difficult assignment that Pastor David's given to me, in a certain sense, because I'm fully aware that during these recent weeks he's had members of

the Catechetical Class taking notes on what's being said when the sermon is being preached, and then on a Tuesday he's asked me to attend the class. It's at some risk that I make an appearance because when he asks them in my presence what it was that I said to them, you'd be surprised, as I am, what I've said!

John the Baptist says, "I have been talking to you about Jesus Christ . . ." ...he might just as well have said - - " -- and you never heard a word!" He didn't say it that way. But this is what he did say: "Why, he's right here in our midst! -- He's standing among us -- a man you do not know."

Now I must ask you the question, as well I should -- how do you account for it? It wasn't as though they did not know that one day He would come. The Jews, even as Christians of this day, are meant to be the people with the forward look. That's one of our distinguishing traits and characteristics. Christians are not people who are glued to the past, Christians are not people who are intimidated by the present. Christians are people who live in hope -- for the next chapter yet to be written. And the old Jew was of that school too. He lived by the promises of God, and God had promised him a Messiah. It wasn't as though they did not know that one day He would come.

And I think I can tell it to you on good authority, that many a devout Jewish mother when she cradled her baby boy in her arms, would say in ever so precious a manner, "And if it please Thee, O God, maybe this boy of mine could be the Promised One!" -- that's how real it was to them that one day He would make an appearance. Now John the Baptist says, "He's here! -- and you don't recognize Him." As J. B. Phillips says it in such a grand manner that nobody can misunderstand: "There stands among you a man you do not know."

Have you had trouble finding God? To put it that way, you know, very properly speaking, we don't find God. God finds us! And the responsibility rests upon us to be alert, that we might be aware of His nearness. That's one reason why He's endowed us by the Holy Spirit, it's the Holy Spirit that enables us to respond to the overtures and the intimations which God is always making and offering. But let's for the moment say, and ask the question: Do you have difficulty being made aware of God? He's always within reach. But disabuse yourself of the notion that He's like the pagans' interpretation of God. Their god plays hide-and-seek. They never quite know where he'll show up next or what he'll be up to. But the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not like that. And yet there are many, sad to say, who have yet to recognize His nearness and to experience the reality which He offers.

Maybe our problem lies in the fact that we don't fully understand the kind of God for whom we ought to look! And because we fail to appreciate His basic nature and characteristics we're unaware of His nearness. Winifred grew up in the country - - some of you can relate to this - - she remembers so well the days when there was a ice house. Every farm seemed to have had one. In the winter-time when the pond would be frozen over, or the nearby creek, the farmer and the others would go out and saw the ice into blocks and then bring it back and store it in the ice house not far away from the kitchen and the pantry. The ice house was filled with sawdust, which provided the necessary insulation, where hopefully the ice would be made available when they needed it in the spring and early summer. It could last that long.

The story is told of the chap who was helping to fill the ice house with sawdust, getting it ready for the winter's use. Unfortunately, he lost his pocket-watch as the sawdust was being placed into the ice house. How do you suppose he found it? - - not pushing madly here and there and at random with his hand until he would come across his watch....but bless his soul, he reminded himself immediately of the basic trait and characteristic of a watch -- it was something that ticked. And so he put his ear down as close as he could to the sawdust, to listen for the ticking of something - - - and that's where he looked! This is one reason why some people are unaware of God when He appears on the scene -- because they have yet to become familiar with His basic nature, His distinguishing traits and characteristics. Whatever your understanding of God is, let me help you at this point - - He's a God of love and He's a God of truth, and if you're looking for God, that's where you will find Him - - wherever love and truth are to be experienced.

Occasionally when we have a plain service of the Holy Communion in Saint Luke Church, I observed as Pastor David did it last Sunday during the Vesper Period - - the half-hour was spent...the service was being concluded, the Sacrament had been received, and as he walked the aisle toward the back of the Nave he spoke these words: "Go now, walk in love and truth, so that no matter where you may be found, love and truth will be there."

God is love. Let me tell you again and ever so often this definition for love that I've fashioned to my own satisfaction: to love is to meet the need in the life of a person. That's what love is. And the most sublime definition for God that we've ever been told or that we'll ever know is that three-word definition: God is love. And what is love? - - to meet the need in the life of a person. That's where God is -- wherever a need is being met, out of sheer love.

Let me give you one illustration after another.

A baby is born at the end of a lot, figuratively speaking, in a donkey's feeding trough -- who would ever have thought to find God there? But God is there!

...in a teenager mother, a peasant, who cradles that Baby in her arms, who nurses that Baby, who provides all that that Baby needs -- -- there is God. But any number of people never saw God there.

Where is God?

...God was in that man who stood by her side. His name was Joseph, he was a carpenter. He couldn't possibly understand what was happening in the trauma of Mary, the teenager who was told that God was using her as a special agent -- the trauma of a pregnancy that she couldn't understand and comprehend....and then to top it all off -- for Mary to become so ecstatic and to say, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" -- to talk that kind of language, to think in those terms!

....and Joseph -- beyond his comprehension, nonetheless is the faithful one -- stands by Mary. Where is God? -- in Joseph, meeting Mary's need!--just to have someone stand by her side, not to desert her, but to be faithful!

There are certain places in the Holy Land that touch my soul and speak to my need as other places do not. Long before I ever made that journey to the land of my fathers and to the land that gave us Christmas I wanted so much to visit Nazareth. And when I would go to Nazareth and stand outside a carpenter's shop I would ask myself the question, as well I should: In the day of Jesus, how many people were made sensitive to God's nearness in that olive-skinned youngster with the dark hair and the dark eyes, who was walking around a carpenter shop ankle-deep in shavings... ..but....Joseph treated Him with respect and reverence and dealt graciously with Him. For undoubtedly Joseph discovered in the fabric of the soul of that teenager the indelible stamp of Jesus Christ. Say it again and ever so often -- Mary cradling the Child....Joseph working side by side with a teenage boy . . . did it ever occur to you how much we Christians have going for us in the Sacrament of Infant Baptism? -- for in that wonderful Sacrament it's spelled out for us again and ever so often that the stamp of God is upon this child. Who is it that said it, and said it well -- a child is always a bit of two people -- plus God. -- -- there is God, in the need that that Baby, that Teenager has to be recognized as a person and to be dealt with as such.

Who would ever have thought of looking for God on the outskirts of the great city Jerusalem -- where there were three crosses, and one surrounded by two. And one of the two cries out, a dying thief -- -- whoever would have thought that God's answer would come to a man condemned to die as a criminal. But God was there! For there was a need to be met. The promise of eternal salvation God never wants to withhold from any man, any time, anywhere, even to the very end! Where God is -- wherever there is need to be met.

Roland Bainton, God bless him, that grand and glorious person, foremost Lutheran scholar, perhaps, in our country, who has been endowed with that way of interpreting Him and making Him so real to us, has written his Martin Luther Christmas Book. If it was within my power I'd make it required reading for every one of you....and he recalls for us in such a winsome way some of Martin Luther's conversations and reflections upon the birth of Jesus. In one section he deals with people in his day who used to say, "Ah, but had I been there when Jesus was born, I would have done this for him, and I would have been the first to do this . . . Martin Luther, as only Luther could do it, suggests as much as to say, "Shut up! Enough of this! ...don't tell me now what you would have done had you been there, in such a grand and glorious manner, until you can first tell me the attention you are paying to your neighbor who lives next door to where you live now. . . . "

Steven Neal has written an excellent book called "The Eternal Dimension" -- which deals in a magnificent way with the God-factor. Somewhere near the end of the book he tells us in a very home-spun fashion about a girl, I think, in an Austrian village, who went down to this bonnhau, the train station, because she was told a distinguished prince of the Church, a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic faith, was to come to her town, and she waited hopefully that he might appear and get off of the train when he arrived....only to her disappointment -- no grand and glorious prince of the church, but a simple priest got off, with a rather shaggy wrinkled cassock. Disappointed, she walked away carrying certain things that the train had brought for her own home. The packages were heavy...and as they trudged up the hill the priest came by her side and offered his assistance -- -- you're right, my friend, the story ends as you think it should end. Somewhere in the conversation it's made plain to her that this was the Cardinal -- there he was.

....as simple a precious story as I can tell you as I walk away from the sacred desk now -- the boy who was told to go to the station to meet a person who was going to arrive, and he said,

"How will I know who he is? -- I have no picture of him."
...and the person said, "If you get there a bit late,
you'll have no trouble finding out who he is. Just look
for someone helping somebody . . "

Looking for God? Anticipating the birth of Jesus Christ in your soul, which was
meant to be a Bethlehem? Listen to Martin Luther, who said, "Hereby ye shall
know if the birth of Jesus Christ is made
effective in you, if you take upon yourself
the need of your brother."

...and that's something to think about.

* * * *

(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WHEN LIFE CAN BECOME A BIT MUCH"
(John 18: 37)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Occasionally, as a few of you know, on a late Saturday night I come here, hopefully to find myself where you now might be seated. It's part of my final preparation for the sermon that's to be preached the next day from this sacred desk. No matter how fervently, no matter how prayerfully the preacher may prepare his sermon, unless he has the person in the pew in mind, it could be preached in vain.....which is simply to suggest that you ought also to keep in mind that when the preacher stands at the sacred desk you pray not only for him, that he may interpret God's truth for you, but you also pray for yourself, that your mind and your heart may be made receptive.

Now when I find myself in this place, seated, again I say, perhaps where you are seated right now, I try to relate to you, to your condition and to your circumstance. With the good fortune that God has given me to be your Pastor as long as I have, I've come to know some of you better than you may realize, and maybe every now and then I can be made privy to the kind of thing out of which you have come, the week that's passed, when you find yourself here....

...maybe it's been a week when life has been a bit much --
...and that's the sermon title -- "When Life Can Become A Bit Much" -- and the text: the 37th verse of the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"And then Pilate said to him, Are you a king?
And Jesus said to him, Thou sayest I am a
king. To this end was I born and for this
purpose did I come into the world."

Now when I sit where you now sit I think I hear the echo of your voice. Now be patient with me and see if I'm telling the truth -- how, when on occasion after you have had a difficult week, when life has been a bit much, I hear you say, --

"I've had it! -- I'm fed up with it! -- Does life really
matter? -- Who cares? -- Why bother? . . . "

...maybe you do not articulate it that way, but it could be in your thinking -- when life has been a bit much.

Life does have a way of tumbling in upon us, and bothering us, and disturbing us. Any number of people I know will freely admit that life seldom works out exactly as bright and as beautiful as they had hoped that it would....but when the untoward and the unexpected becomes the ugly, then life can become a bit much. What then?

There's a text for this sermon on this Sunday next before Christmas, which comes straight from the final chapter in the life of our Blessed Lord, and you're saying to yourself as you think, isn't that a bit odd? -- why invite us to think about the final chapter in the life of our Blessed Lord when this is the Sunday next before Christmas? -- surely during Advent and Christmas we concentrate upon the birth of Jesus Christ, the beginning of His life. Why now, on this day so close to Christmas, should we have to consider what comes straight from the final chapter in the life of our Blessed Lord?

Let me put it for you this way -- suppose you were commissioned to write the biography of someone. Where would you begin? Well, where have biographers begun? Most of them, I presume, begin with the circumstances surrounding the life, at the very beginning, of that individual -- his parents, where he was born, the particular place, the circumstances of the birth, when they're talking about the life of a certain person. Occasionally someone will begin at mid-point -- your first chapter will deal with what this person was like in the prime of his or her life, when everything was going for him and going handsomely -- that's the way to begin to talk about this person.

But would I surprise you if I were to suggest that maybe the better point at which to begin is not at the beginning, is not at mid-point -- but with the final chapter in the person's life. For what really matters most ultimately is the way a person ends his years. Our Blessed Lord, then, is coming to the final chapter in His life. He's never been more royal, He's never been more godlike . . . He's never been more dedicated, as He comes to the very end, and that's what matters most.

There was a gentleman who distinguished himself -- there was a great deal of pressure made to have the story of his life written while he was still alive -- not only to pay him tribute but also to draw upon his own resources, to get the facts straight from the person himself. But he resisted the honor of having a biography written for him while he could still read it for himself. And he gave this reason: he had seen a number of people in his lifetime, from his vantage-point of years, who had fallen flat on their faces as they came to the end of their years. There is

no fool like an old fool.....there is no tragedy like the tragedy of an old person who fouls up his life at the finish line. So he said, "No -- you will wait until after I'm gone, and then you can write it just as it was -- from the beginning to the very end."

Here is our Blessed Lord as He's ending His life here on earth -- every bit the King He was meant to be, being able to say in the face of the jolting chapter yet to be written, "To this end was I born, and as a man with a mission I will be faithful to that mission to the very end."

Now why am I preaching this sermon today? I have reason to believe any number among you have been jolted by life, you have had your disappointing experiences. It's become extremely difficult for you at times to remember the end for which you were born, and in desperation and frustration you cry out in a futile manner --

"What's the use? . . . Why bother? . . . Who cares?

. . . Does it really make any difference?

. . . I should be born for this -- to have my life
thrown for a loop in this manner?

You see, the vicious thing about thinking like that, whether you really think what you say, or whether you say what you think, it comes out pretty much in the end, because eventually such catch phrases --

...Why bother?....Who cares?....Does it really matter?...I'm fed up...
-- may lead you to become the kind of person who will eventually short-change the validity of all that's good and decent and honorable -- --

-- why be good if nothing matters?

-- why be honest, if nobody cares?

-- why try to be honorable, if ultimately it's a meaningless thing?

...that's the risk, that's the danger! -- lest this catch-phrase, you see, cripple you, to become that kind of person who settles for a meaninglessness of life.

Where did I read it -- someone picturing life as a person with that card table in front of him and a large jigsaw puzzle. He's completely overwhelmed by the magnitude of the jigsaw puzzle in its totality. And so in some attempt to make some kind of meaning out of it he concentrates on just a few pieces, and luckily he finds them and interlocks them and puts them together, and he knows a measure of satisfaction for a while at least.....and then the cat or the dog in the house, or somebody awkwardly bumps against the table and it jolts it and the pieces are

separated - - - after all that honest effort. Philosophically speaking, you and I can be like that. We do find for a little while a little bit of meaning in that little portion on which we concentrate - - that limited area of our relationships in life, where we live, where we labor, where we love. And then something happens -- it becomes fragmented , it's disheveled, it's not neatly packaged and put together as once we thought we could do it....

-- it may be in the world where you work -- you've gotten along handsomely for a certain period in your life, and then you're riffed, or you're put out on disability, or you're retired because of an age requirement....and life becomes a bit much! What then?

-- or take the neighborhood where you live -- perchance once it was fairly idyllic....now it's changed, so different . . . and life becomes a bit much. What then? Do you throw in the sponge? Do you say, "I've had it -- I'm fed up with it! -- Is this the end toward which I have been working?

-- you're married -- your spouse has been with you for a number of years, and then something happens and your relationship begins to deteriorate . . . and life becomes a bit much...

...and who among you cannot stand up and testify at this point -- when death becomes the jolt, and robs you of someone who has been your alter-ego, who has completed your life, and you should live so long to have this happen to you! What then? -- when life becomes a bit much, can you be loyal to the royal that is meant to be coursing through your veins?

Here is Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord, facing the final chapter in His life, and life had become a bit much for Him - - that marvelous relationship that He had had with the Blessed Mother, soon He'd be taken away - - - that grand and glorious thing that He'd shared with three of the disciples in particular -- Peter, James and John - - that's coming in now for a jolt. He'd no longer be able to give them the beckoning look and say, "Come on, let's talk about a number of things" - - how they prized that thing in life!

....the kind of relationship He had with all twelve of the disciples, the relationship He had with the scribes, the Pharisees and the Saducees....

- - all of it now coming to an end such as this, with a cross! - - when life becomes a bit much! . . .

Jesus Christ stands there calmly and courageously, "You said I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this reason I came into the earth, to be faithful to my mission."

You ask me when it was in the life of Jesus Christ that He became fully aware of who who He was meant to be and what He was meant to do -- scholars vary in giving you the answer. But I do know there was that sublime moment when the heavens parted and the voice from Heaven said, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased -- listen to him. He has a right to speak. He can give you good counsel."

I carry around in my wallet -- it is well worn now -- a scrap of paper on which one of the persons that I love most in this life had written for me something that nurtured his soul. It reads in a very simple fashion:

"There are two very important days in the life of any person , , , the first, the day on which he was born; and secondly, the day on which he discovers why he was born."

From the Christian perspective, everyone was born so that God's purpose for that person's life can be fulfilled -- come wind or weather, and life becomes a bit much, to remain loyal to the royal that courses through your blood fully and freely.

Pascal, the great philosopher, used to be greatly troubled by people who spent all of their time and their energy in life dealing with the incidentals of life, and seldom if ever asking the fundamental question: Why? To what end? There was a man who came to our shores from across the waters because he had learned that there lived in a little-known village here in the States a physician whose reputation had spread even to Europe. He was an extraordinary person who dealt in an extraordinary way with his calling. When patients would come to him, he'd get around from his desk and he'd sit in a chair and face them eye to eye, and he'd say, "Why have you come to me?" . . .

...and invariably the answer would always be:

"Because I believe you can help me to become better -- you can make me well."

...and then he would ask the most extraordinary of all questions -- one word: "Why? -- to what end do you want to become better?"

Gandhi, that magnificent spirit who has much to teach all of us, tried to get people to subscribe to his basic philosophy of life. And one of the things about Gandhi was, he was a tee-totaler. One day there was a person came to him who was engaged in the liquor business, and his conscience was bothering him a bit. And yet he was hoping that maybe Gandhi would allow him to remain in that liquor

business, and he came and told Gandhi about it....and to justify himself he said to Gandhi, "It's the only work I have ever known, and a man must live, you know --"and Gandhi took him to the quick and simply said, "Why?"

...to this end was I born, and for this reason did I
come into the world . . .

I've always had a very high and holy regard for the Church of Scotland. It's made a significant contribution to all of Christendom, on two fronts I presume....

-- at one time, I think in all Christendom no group of people adhered more to the Scriptures than the people who came out of the Church of Scotland. That's why to this day in some churches of Scottish ancestry there are those who maintain that tradition, when the service begins, it begins with an elder of the church coming right out and placing the Scriptures, with veneration and holy respect, upon the pulpit - - - as much as to say, Here now is how we will be rooted and grounded in the faith.

-- and then their Catechism, the first question that remains today, I believe, even in the Presbyterian Church, the first question which was drilled into the mind of every youngster in a good Scottish home:

What is the chief end of man?

and the answer:

The chief end of man is to glorify God, and
to enjoy Him forever.

Happy indeed is that person who sees as the justification for his existence to bring honor and glory to God, come wind or weather, and even when life becomes a bit much.

I wish she were here to tell you - - perhaps you can hear the echo of her voice from Heaven itself. The word had come to her that her daughter who had gone off to China to be a missionary years ago was victimized and raped and killed by animal-like soldiers . . . the pride and joy of her life. What would she do, when life became a bit much? She received special training, and she herself went to China, to the very place where they had done this terrible thing to her daughter....and for twenty years ministered to the people of that community with Christian love and devotion.....When life becomes a bit much, happy indeed is that person who can say, "I was born to be like a king -- come wind or weather, to serve my Lord.

What is the meaning of Christmas?

Here it is in a capsule fashion: God come to earth --

Heaven touching earth -- so that we may
see that it's absolutely possible to
reflect a bit of Heaven on earth.
To this end are you and I here.
This I most certainly believe.

Last night, after I had been here, I went to the parsonage at 919 Highland Drive, and for a solid hour I sat before a blazing hearth and meditated upon the passing of the years that God has given to me. And more earnestly than ever I covet for you as I covet for myself that as the remaining chapters are written, we may be loyal to the royal that becomes a child of God.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NOTHING TO FEAR EXCEPT . . . "

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

" . . and the glory of the Lord shone round
about them, and they were sore afraid. And
the angel of the Lord said, Fear not . . . "

Christmas is a time for remembering. Poor indeed is that person who doesn't travel down memory lane, particularly to the town of his childhood and his youth. Indulge me for a moment as I recall that small town . . .

....there wasn't much to do, really, in a small town fifty years ago. Everything closed down on a Sunday, everything except the churches. They were open....

...and then the drug store - the only one we had in town, they remained open to accommodate people who might have emergencies....

...but on a Sunday afternoon there wasn't really much to do.

We did our best to find something to do, maybe like going down to the James A. Eck's Sons truck patch and walking around from field to field, looking for arrow-heads that were left there by the warring Muncey Indians, generations ago....

...or perchance we'd walk the railroad tracks....

- if we were brave and bold enough, we might put pennies on the track, or nails, and then stand back a respectful distance when the giant locomotive came, with an endless number of cars, to flatten the pennies and the nails that we had put there....

But I suppose, if you will permit me to tell you, the most daring of all things was when some of us got together, and we went to the edge of town to pay a visit to the old mansion. Some Philadelphia folks years before had come and built it, and then as fate would have it, and whatever their fortune may have been, they returned no longer....and the old mansion fell into disrepair. It wasn't long until it had the reputation for being a haunted house....

....so we went, with some trepidation, some of us drew a little closer than others did, and that's about as far as we went, to the first step. We could almost hear the creaking of the floors and the moaning of the wind rushing through the open windows....

We stood there, neither one of us willing to take another step, until someone came and grabbed my shoulder, and said, "Who's afraid?" I wish I would have stopped there, because he looked me straight in the eye and said, "You're not afraid, are you?" ...and the only answer I could give, being an honest person -- "Yes, I am afraid."

By nature I am a fearful person. I run scared today, in many different directions and in many different times. But who isn't afraid? Psychologists tell us that we're born into this world with two basic fears, and all along the line we accomplish so little because we're crippled by fear, and again and again and again we accumulate a seemingly endless number of things that cause us to be afraid. The child remains in the heart of every single one of us. We are afraid.

Small wonder, then, that God saw fit to choose as the very first words to be spoken by His preacher to that first Christmas congregation -- "Don't be afraid... don't be afraid!" But the shepherds were afraid. They were afraid by the startling glow that shone upon them from Heaven. But they also had other fears before that moment. They had the fear of those who would rob them of their sheep, their livelihood....

....they had the fear in that day of falling woolen prices,
and what that would do to their economy....

...they were at the mercy of so many things, and they were afraid.

Who isn't afraid?

We're afraid -- afraid of so much....

...afraid of growing old...

...afraid that those whom we love who are young may not grow old,

...and those who are young who know that they live in a world
such as this, with a nuclear threat hovering upon them always,
and constantly, for the first time perhaps in history we've
reared a generation of young people who are running scared, and
they are afraid -- not only the old, the young as well....

No matter where you look, fear remains in big bold letters.

We're afraid of the Russians....

We're afraid of the Chinese....

We're afraid of an economy that's out of control....

We're afraid of people, strangers -- we're afraid to greet them, to talk
to them, we're afraid to be found in their presence....

Gearhard Lenski wasn't afraid, that grand and good man of the Faith.

One day, in broad daylight, he went to post a letter, unafraid.,,

....and diabolically possessed young people, they pounced upon him, bruised him and battered him...he lost an eye, and his death was hastened. But he wasn't afraid. But he lived in a world now that causes us to be afraid.

When the Parish Deaconess moved into the cottage at 9014 Colesville Road I said to her, "Sister, you're on the ground floor, your bedroom is at ground level, there is a stairwell in the back - - we'd better make sure the windows are secured, we'd better put a grill on the back stairwell door." Sister said to me, "But, Pastor, I can't go on living in fear. I refuse to be crippled by it, morning, noon or night."

The shepherds were afraid. God said, "Don't be afraid."

We're afraid of our sins, we're afraid of the prospect of Hell. God's first word to us is "Don't be afraid."

We are in the world, of course we are, and maybe even God can't change the kind of world in which we find ourselves. Only we can do that! And because it rests in our hands we fail so miserably, so then what does God do, this God who loves us? He says, "I will come to you, and I'll become part of it. And I'll be in it, up to the nail-prints - - that's what I'll do."

....and when people begin to hear God speak like that, and when they felt the nearness of Jesus Christ always within reach, this God-come-to-us-in-human-form - - - Emmanuel -- that's what it means -- "I am here with you, I will not leave you, I will not forsake you . . . "

....there are some of us, then, who aren't afraid, as long as someone such as God is within reach. And that's the meaning of Christmas - - God is within reach.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

only kind of world in which we can go on living while we're mortal creatures. And God, knowing that, aware of all the help that we need, says, "I will come to you -- I won't let you be had! -- I won't let you go to Hell! You weren't meant to be taken! . . .

. . . you are meant for Heaven, and I'll come down to earth
and show you the way, and I'll be with it, and I will be
with you in that wicked world, even up to the nail-prints . . "

Now that's what Christmas is all about! -- a God who comes to us
and says, "I won't let you be had. I'm on your side!"

....it's as absolutely wonderful as all that.

This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)